

Islamism and Gender

A case study of the Algerian MSP (HMS)

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Masters Thesis in Peace and Conflict Studies

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

December 10, 2009

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2009

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Abstract

During the last decade, many studies on Islamism have focused on the modernizing force of Islamist movements. Yet, while many Islamist parties seem to be increasingly embracing “modern” values in terms of political and economic organization (such as democracy, human rights, political pluralism and economic liberalism), a solid resistance towards the concept of gender equality remains intact. Is patriarchy a *raison d’être* for Islamist movements? Or are we about to see an “evolution” on this issue too? As a contribution to the general debate on Islamism and modernity, this paper seeks to investigate whether the Algerian Islamist party HMS - frequently referred to as the “Woman party” due to its large female activist base - should be understood as a modernizing factor on gender relations. Methodologically, the paper borrows central concepts from social movement analysis theory. The material was largely gathered through fieldwork in Algeria January 2009.

The main findings indicate a development characterized by two parallel, apparently contradictory, tendencies: in terms of the “practical” aspects of women’s reality such as education, work and political participation, it seems that the MSP has indeed functioned as a modernizing factor through comprehensive efforts to encourage and facilitate women’s increased participation. On the other hand, at the ideological level the movement seems to have stagnated in a rather “regressive” position. The movement’s gender discourse is characterized by a continued resistance towards translating women’s increased political and economic independence in terms of equal rights and women’s differential rights are continuously legitimated in the name of religion and biology. I argue that this apparent inconsistency should be seen in close connection with the political environment within which the MSP operates, and that these tensions are likely to become all the more acute in the near future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Bjørn Olav Utvik, for all his time, support and encouragement, and not least, for including me in the research project “Fault Lines of Islamism: Negotiating Power, Participation and Patriarchy”. It has been an incredibly interesting and educational experience. I would also like to thank the other members of the research group, Kai Kverme, Tilde Rosmer and Truls Tønnessen for their comments and cooperation throughout the different stages of the process.

This project would not have been possible without the help of numerous persons. I would therefore very much like to express my gratitude to all my sources in Algiers for their time and willingness to meet and talk with me, Khaled Drareni for his infinite hospitality and practical facilitation, and Amel Boubekour for patiently answering so many of my questions.

Finally I would like to thank my friends and family who have been of great encouragement throughout the entire process. I especially want to thank Jon for his endless patience and indispensable assistance in all aspects of life.

Oslo, December 10, 2009

List of acronyms

<i>AIS</i>	<i>Armée Islamique du Salut</i>
<i>FIS</i>	<i>Front Islamique du Salut</i>
<i>FLN</i>	<i>Front National de la libération</i>
<i>GIA</i>	<i>Groupment Islamique Armé</i>
<i>GSPC</i>	<i>Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat</i>
<i>HCS</i>	<i>Haut Conseil de Sécurité</i>
<i>MEN</i>	<i>Mouvement pour l'Entente Nationale</i>
<i>MIA</i>	<i>Mouvement Islamique Armée</i>
<i>MJD</i>	<i>Mouvement pour la Jeunesse et la Démocratie</i>
<i>MNE</i>	<i>Mouvement Nationale d'Esperance</i>
<i>MNR</i>	<i>Mouvement du Rénouveau Nationale</i>
<i>MPC</i>	<i>Mouvement pour la Prédication et le Changement</i>
<i>MSP</i>	<i>Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix</i>
<i>MSI</i>	<i>Mouvement pour une Société Islamique</i>
<i>PT</i>	<i>Parti des Travailleurs</i>
<i>RCD</i>	<i>Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie</i>
<i>RND</i>	<i>Rassemblement Nationale et Démocratique</i>
<i>UNFA</i>	<i>Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes</i>
<i>AFEPEC</i>	<i>Association des Femmes pour l'Egalité et l'Exercice de la Citoyennete</i>
<i>AEF</i>	<i>Association pour l'Emancipation des Femmes</i>
<i>ADPDF</i>	<i>Association pour la Défense et Promotion des Femmes</i>
<i>WLUML</i>	<i>Women Living under Muslim Laws</i>

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1 Introduction

Almost without exceptions, moderate Islamist movements constitute the most powerful political opposition to incumbent regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. A better understanding of the social and political impact of these movements is therefore crucial in order to understand the development in the region and to build sound political relations. This is especially relevant for Norway, since Norway is involved in a series of peace and reconciliation initiatives in the region. Furthermore, Algeria is of particular interest, because Norway has recently identified the country as an important future cooperation partner, due to its rich oil and gas resources and its strategic position in both Africa and the Arab world. The Norwegian embassy was, accordingly, recently moved from Tunis to Algiers, and Norway has now established itself as the country's second largest foreign investor, mainly through the huge investments of the partly state owned Norwegian-based oil company Statoil in Algeria's oil and gas industry. Given the strong presence of Islamist movements in the Algerian political landscape, Norway would do wise in learning more about the political and social agenda of leading Algerian Islamist movements, and about their relationships to the Algerian state.

Islam and Islamism have become increasingly politicized topics during the last couple of decades. This should be seen in connection with the deteriorating diplomatic relations between several Western and Arab countries, which is, at least partly, a result of events such as the US "War on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, the role of the US and other Western states in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the emergence of radical and violent Islamist networks and their terror actions against Western civil populations. These developments have polarized the dominant discourses on both sides, and the increased tensions between "Islam" and the "West" has become a much cherished topic in international media. Despite the efforts of many scholars, activists and politicians, Huntington's jargon about an inevitable "clash of civilizations"¹ - due to the supposed incompatibility of their value sets - still seems to characterize the discourse not only of the hardliners at both sides.²

¹ Huntington, Samuel P., *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

² Indeed, this has been the case to the extent that a series of interreligious dialogue centres have been established in the specific aim of building down tensions and promote mutual respect among different religions (like the UN organ *Dialogue Among Civilizations*, Tony Blair's *Faith Foundation* and Kjell Magne Bondevik's *Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights*). Paradoxically, a frequent critique towards some of these initiatives has been that they actually reproduce the same dividing lines they aim at building down; due to the heavy focus on religious

In line with this logic, Islamism is in the West most often portrayed as a reactionary, authoritarian force, with the aim of destroying “Western” values such as democracy, freedom, and gender equality.

As a reaction against the widespread understanding of Islamism as an irrational, anti-modern force, a number of researchers have tried to promote a more nuanced picture by underlining the “modernizing” aspects of Islamism. These authors have pointed to the so called moderate Islamists movements, most often associated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and argued that these in many respects constitute one of the MENA regions most important agents for social and political change. The Islamists, it is maintained, are in general keen promoters of economic and political liberalization, and rapid technological development. Furthermore, Islamist activism is seen as paving the way for certain “modern” values such as increased individualism, as well as the professionalization, impersonalization (and possibly even the secularization) of politics.

The answer one provides to the question of whether the Islamists constitute a regressive or modernizing force has considerable practical political consequences for how both domestic power holders and the international community should relate to the growing Islamist movements, for instance with regard to their political inclusion or exclusion. Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that the general politicization of the topic has had considerable spill over effects on both political and academic debates on Islamism. Indeed, both academic and political discourses have a tendency to be characterized by poorly disguised pro- or anti-Islamist sentiments and to draw either overly pessimistic or optimistic images of Islamism’s compatibility with democratic values.

Starting from this theoretical debate, the aim of the present study is to test the hypothesis that Islamism is a modernizing force on the issue of gender relations. This is an important issue both because diverging views on the issue of women’s position constitutes one of the main bones of contention in the polemics between the Islamists and the dominant normative ideas in the West, and because women’s position constitute a particular symbolic issue for Islamist movements. While many Islamist parties seem to be increasingly embracing “modern” values in terms of political and economic organization, the resistance towards the concept of gender equality appears to remain largely intact. Does this indicate that

identity, the different “civilizations”, in Huntington’s terms – though “dialoguing” instead of “clashing” – are still perceived as essentially different.

patriarchalism is a *raison d'être* for Islamist movements - or are we about to see an “evolution” on this issue too?

As a contribution to the general debate on Islamism and modernity, this thesis asks whether the Algerian Islamist party *Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix*, MSP (*Harakat mujtama' as-silm*, HMS, مجلس المجتمع فلاح, formerly called Hamas, حماس) should be understood as a modernizing factor on gender relations. The party appeared to be a suitable case study for many reasons. The MSP is closely associated with the Muslim Brothers and is the largest legal Islamist party in Algeria. It is currently part of Algeria's ruling Presidential Alliance together with the *Front de la Libération Nationale*, FLN, and the *Rassemblement Nationale Démocratique*, RND. Interestingly, the MSP is the political party in Algeria with the largest female activist base - it is therefore frequently referred to as the “Woman Party” (*le parti de femmes*).

Methodologically, the paper borrows central concepts from social movement analysis theory, while the empirical material was largely gathered through fieldwork in Algeria in January 2009. The main findings indicate a development characterized by two parallel, seemingly contradictory, tendencies: in terms of the practical aspects of women's reality such as education, work and political participation, it seems that the MSP has indeed functioned as a modernizing factor, through comprehensive efforts to encourage and facilitate women's increased participation. On the other hand, at the ideological level the movement seems to have stagnated in a rather regressive position. The movement's gender discourse is characterized by a resistance towards translating women's increased political and economic independence in terms of equal citizenship and women's differential rights are continuously legitimated in the name of religion and biology. I will argue that this apparent inconsistency should be seen in close connection with the political environment within which the MSP operates, and that these tensions are likely to become all the more acute in the near future.

2 Theoretical framework and research design

The goal of the thesis is to investigate whether the MSP can be said to exercise a modernizing influence on the social and political role of women. In order to answer this question, we need to specify at least two things: first, what do we mean with the term *modernizing* with regards to women's position, and secondly, how can we "measure" the influence or impact of a social movement? These are the challenges that will be dealt with in the present chapter. For these purposes it is useful to briefly review the existing body of literature on Islamism, both in order to investigate how the term *modernizing* is customarily being used and to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the dominant types of theoretical - and methodological - approaches to the phenomenon.

2.1 Previous research - what is Islamism?

There exists a huge body of literature on Islamism. Interest in the subject grew drastically in the late 1970s in conjunction with events such as the Iranian revolution (1978-79), the assassination of Egypt's President Sadat (1981) and the Hama uprising in Syria (1982), and it naturally exploded after the September 11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. launch of the "War on terror". As "Islamic" terrorism has become security threat number one, an impressive number of studies, largely focusing on security, are published each year. The phenomenon has many names - Islamic fundamentalism, political Islam, Islamic revivalism, Islamism - and there seems to exist a widespread confusion with regards to the similarities and differences between the various terms. In this study I use the term *Islamism* because it appears to be the most frequent term in the academic literature, possibly because it reflects a relatively neutral approach.

A noticeable aspect of the existing literature is the apparent lack of a common framework. Being a domain of study (and not a discipline), Islamist activism is approached from the entire disciplinary spectrum, each determined by a specific disciplinary focus and research agenda.³ Political scientists, for example, have been mostly concerned with the impact of Islamism on the state and politics; sociologists with exploring the demographic

³ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *Islamic Activism - A Social Movement Theory Approach*, (Indiana University Press, 2004), 4.

roots of Islamist recruits; religious studies scholars focus on the ideas that motivate Islamism; and historians on the histories of particular Islamist movements. While all of these contribute to broaden our understanding of different aspects of Islamist activism, the lack of a common framework complicates the task of bridging the different dimensions.⁴ This lack of a common framework is reflected in the ongoing and central debate on what Islamism actually *is* and hence what a good definition should look like. Frequently used definitions include those of Olivier Roy and the International Crisis Group:

Islamism is the building of an Islamic state.⁵

Islamism is defined here, and will be in future Crisis Group reports, as synonymous with "Islamic activism", the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character.⁶

These definitions effectively illustrate the great variety of interpretations of the basic features of Islamism. While many scholars (like Roy) traditionally have emphasized the *political* aspects - that the "basic feature" of Islamists is that they aim to create an Islamic state - others understand Islamism as little more than the assertion and promotion of "Islamic" beliefs. While the former might be accused of reductionism or rigidity, there are also reasons to argue that the latter may be a bit too general. These differences in definitions reflect of course the enormous multitude and heterogeneity of the movements and actors that claim to work for the establishment of an Islamic order of some sort. In fact, these movements differ so widely both in terms of proclaimed goal and appropriate means that many prefer to speak of "Islamisms". What do actors like Osama Bin Laden and his supporters have in common with for instance the Turkish *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP (*the Justice and Development Party*)? Is Islamism basically a political ideology, an identity marker, or an expression of cultural nationalism? Is Islamic fundamentalism just a more extreme variant of Islamism or are the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Roy, Olivier, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, (London: Hurst, 2004), 2.

⁶ International Crisis Group, Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, "Understanding Islamism", (March 2005), 1. URL <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3301> (Accessed 12. 07. 2009). (These definitions were presented to me by Jacob Høigilt, researcher at the Institute for Applied International Studies, FAFO, during a seminar on Islamism at the University of Oslo, October 2009.)

two essentially different? These are some of the major questions in contemporary Islamism research, questions that so far have not been answered properly.

There does, however, seem to be an increasing recognition Islamism is a multidimensional phenomenon and that there might not exist an “Islamist essence” - and consequently that there is now need for a more nuanced view and multiple categorization of the various Islamist currents. In fact, many publications on Islamism have been criticized precisely on the grounds that they assume that the moral and moralizing discourses articulated by the various Islamist groups express agreement on unchanging core ideas or beliefs.⁷ As Ismail notes, a clear case of the invocation of particular repertoires without agreement on content is the call for the application of the *Sharia*. In substantive terms there is no agreement on what the *Sharia* and its application mean.⁸ Moreover, there exists very little theorization on the type of institutions that an Islamic state should have. Many Islamist movements temporarily devote their time to either missionary or political work, or are even explicitly not state-orientated. This arguably makes it misleading to define Islamism as a political ideology.

Faced with such challenges, other scholars have argued that a better approach would be to conceptualize Islamism as a discursive framework.⁹ These authors try to grasp Islamism by seeing Islamists as actors who borrow central concepts from an “Islamic universe of meaning” and then work to negotiate their interpretation and practice within specific socio-economic and political contexts. The strength with this approach is that it captures the historicity of Islamic discourse and directs the analytical focus towards the dynamic and political processes of negotiating practices and ideas authorized as Islamic. The main aspirations within this Islamic discursive framework are to bridge the gap between religion and practices, to go back to the Islamic *sources* and to restore this ideal society in a contemporary context. The discourse emphasizes the oneness of Islam, it expresses a reaction to alienation and longing for authenticity. Moreover, it sees itself as a discursive anti-thesis of a decadent morally corrupt West.

Finally, instead of debating what Islamism *basically* is - and thus risk to be reproached for essentialism - many researchers have argued that Islamism is best accounted for by a review of the historical and intellectual foundations for its emergence.

⁷ Ismail, Salwa, *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*, (London: I.B. Tauris and Co Ltd, 2006), 7.

⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹ Høigilt, Jacob and Kjetil Selvik, "Hva er Islamisme?", *Babylon* vol 6, no. 2, 8 - 20; Asad, Talal, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam", (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1985), referred to in Ismail's *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*, 16.

Islamism is a modern social, cultural and political phenomenon that grew out of ideas about Islam and the state that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Originating in a reaction against the colonial powers civilization-building schemes, Western dominance and political injustice, Islamism has passed through different phases of assimilation and rejection of Western political thinking and has developed further in conjunction with historical events such as the independence struggles.¹⁰ Faced with the consequences of failed Western-orientated modernization processes the question that interested many Arab intellectuals during the early 19th century was: what has gone wrong for the Muslim world? Why hasn't the Middle East experienced the same progress as Europe? Arguably, the most interesting answers to these questions were formulated by modernist thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din Afghani (1839 - 1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849 - 1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865 - 1935). These intellectuals argued that the solution to the "Arab problem" was to reform Islam and make it compatible with rationalism and science. These thinkers came to have considerable influence on the man that is usually seen as the main architect of modern Islamism, Hassan al-Banna (1906 - 1949). In 1928 al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered to be the most influential Islamist network of the Sunni world today. In almost in every country where Islamist parties are allowed to compete in elections, the parties that are affiliated with, or under direct influence of, the Muslim Brotherhood constitute the main political opposition.

Hassan al-Banna's main achievement was that he managed to transform an elite intellectual fashion into a popular phenomenon, and thus to transform his Islamic association into a mass movement. The single most important factor for the dramatic expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood was al-Banna's sophisticated organisational capabilities and charismatic ideological leadership. By emphasizing concerns that appealed to a variety of constituencies - such as colonialism, public health, education, natural resources management, social inequality, Arab nationalism, and the growing conflict in Palestine - Al-Banna was able to recruit from among a cross-section of Egyptian society.¹¹

The massive popularity of the regime critical movement evidently worried the Egyptian regime, and in 1949 Hassan al-Banna was killed by police agents. In 1954, after many years of tension, the conflict between President Naser and the Muslim Brotherhood

¹⁰ Volpi, Frédéric, *Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria*, (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 26 – 27.

¹¹ Commins, David, "Hasan al-Banna (1906 - 1949)" in (Red) Rhanema, Ali, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, (Zed Books Ltd., 1994), 133 - 149.

(now headed by Hasan al-Hudaybi) culminated and the Brotherhood was banned. Six of its leaders were killed and thousands imprisoned. The organization was crushed and had to wait until the 70's to be able to operate again, this time under Anwar al-Sadat. The harsh confrontation with the regime in 1954 and subsequent repression - often referred to as *al-mihna* (the challenge) in moderate Islamist circles - laid the foundation for Sayyid Qutb's development of more radical doctrines, which, in turn, paved the way for the emergence of the global *jihadi* current. The Muslim Brotherhood leadership, however, early renounced Qutb's literalist and violent interpretation of Islam and developed a doctrine in which peaceful work for gradual reform - including participation in the official politics of the country - constituted the main strategy.

The social and political program of current day Muslim Brothers associates borrows selectively from the West (or from the values that the West likes to attribute to itself). They are eager advocates for rapid economic development, and market-oriented reforms; political liberalization through improved election procedures and systems of power rotation; and they advocate meritocracy and fight against corruption. Yet, in terms morality, the Muslim Brothers take a clear distance from Western values. The West's achievements in economic, social and political terms are seen as "hollow" as it lacks a moral foundation. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood argues in favour of rapid reforms, to keep up with the West materially and economically, but at the same time make the developments subject to an authentic Islamic morale.

Beyond the Muslim Brotherhood's version of Islamism - which the ICG categorizes as the Islamic political movements (*al-harakât al-islamiyya al-siyassiyya*¹²) - there are two other main and distinct types of contemporary Sunni Islamism: the *Missionary* and the *Jihadi*.¹³ The *Missionary* - Islamic missions of conversion (*al-da'wa*) - exists in two main, and quite different, movements; the thoroughly structured *Tablighi* movement, and the much more diffuse *Salafiyya* movement. They do however share one purpose, which is to maintain and protect the Muslim identity and the faith and moral order of Islam towards the the forces of unbelief. The characteristic actors are missionaries (*du'ah*), and the '*ulama* (the Islamic community). The *Jihadi* - the Islamic armed struggle (*al-jihad*) - exists in three main variants: internal (combating nominally Muslim regimes considered impious); irredentist (fighting to

¹²According to the ICG, the political current typically: accepts the nation state; renounces of violence (except under conditions of foreign occupation); articulates a reformist rather than revolutionary vision; and invokes universal democratic norms (International Crisis Group, "Understanding Islamism", 1).

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Understanding Islamism", 1.

reclaim land ruled by non-Muslims or under occupation); and global (combating the West). The characteristic actor is thus the fighter (*al-mujahid*).¹⁴

Women and Islamism

Despite an extensive literature on the relation between women and Islam and the status of women in Islamic societies, the number of empirical case studies of the gender ideologies and practices of *Islamist movements* appears to remain very limited.

Regardless of the enormous variations in interregional, intraregional, and class variations, monolithic stereotypes of Muslim women have long prevailed in the West. As a response to this, and in connection with the general increasing academic interest for Islam, the literature on Muslim women has grown voluminous during the last two decades. Much of this literature fall into one of two dominating interpretative poles: the “positive” one, who rejects the idea that Islam has anything to do with women’s low status in many Muslim societies and attributes this to other political, economic and structural factors;¹⁵ and the “negative” one, that holds that Islam is a major determinant on women’s lives in Muslim societies.¹⁶ Yet, most current scholarship rejects the idea that the *Islamic religion* per se is the primary determinant of the status of Muslim women, or that Islam is more incoherently misogynist than the other monotheistic traditions. Ann Elizabeth Mayer writes:

The reference to ‘Islam’ in the book is potentially misleading, since I repudiate the commonly held view that Islam by it self determines the attitudes one finds in the Muslim World on human rights issues. In fact, I see Islam as only one factor in the reception of human rights in the Middle East.¹⁷

Legal and theological questions have been at the forefront of public and academic debates on women and Islam. The relationship and compatibility between the Human Rights Declaration

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ This current is represented by writers such as Valentine Moghadam, a political economist of Iranian background, who argues that women’s low labour force participation in the MENA region reflects the functioning of oil economies, more than of Islam.

¹⁶ Represented by writers such as Haideh Moghissi, who argues that defensiveness about women’s conditions under Islam easily lapses into dangerous apologetics. Source: “Women In Islamic Societies: A Selected Review of Social Scientific Literature”, (Washington DC: The Library of Congress, November 2005), 13-14.

¹⁷ Mayer, Ann Elisabeth, *Islam and Human Rights - Tradition and Politics*, (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), xi.

- and specifically, women's human rights - and Islamic Family law has attracted the interest of many researchers, as have theological questions about women's place in Islam.

Far fewer studies have focused on women's position within Islamist movements, or how Islamic norms or principles with regards to women's position are being negotiated through the Islamists' social and political activism. The few studies on this issue that I have been able to localize include Omayma Abdelatif's "In the Shadow of the Brothers - The Women of the Muslim Brotherhood" and "Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism" (co-authored with Marina Ottaway)¹⁸; and Islah Jad's; "Between Religion and Secularism: Islamist Women of Hamas".¹⁹ These studies are interesting because they address the changing character of Islamist movements and the potential of Islamist women to become an important instrument for promoting the rights of Arab women.

Islamism in Algeria

Algerian Islamism constitutes another relatively understudied topic, at least when compared with the number of studies devoted to Islamist movements in the "core" of the Middle East such as Iran and Egypt. This is especially true for the English-speaking academia; as late as in 1998, there were only two books on Islamists movements in Algeria available in English: François Burgat's *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*,²⁰ that had been translated from French, and Emad Eldin Shahin's *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*.²¹ Due to its historic presence, France has played, and continues to play, a leading role in the scholarly tradition on Algeria, and a number of historical works in French by both French and Algerian scholars have treated the topic as part of broader historical analyses. First in the late 1990s and early 2000s it seems that Algerian Islamism become a hot

¹⁸ Abdel-Latif, Omayma, Marina Ottaway, "Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism" and Abdel-Latif, Omayma, "In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2007, URL:

<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19423> and <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22347> (Accessed 12. 07. 2009).

¹⁹ Fereshteh, Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, (New York: The Feminist Press, City University, 2005).

²⁰ Burgat, François and William Dowell. *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*. (University of Texas Press, 1997).

²¹ Shahin, Emad Eldin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, (Boulder, Colorado: Sage Publications Inc, 1998). Source: Shahin, Emad Eldin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, 15.

topic, resulting in a series of interesting publications in both English and French.²² Naturally, the main preoccupation of these books has been to explain the apparently sudden rise of the Islamic movement in Algeria, as well as how and why the 1991 elections could come to have so fatal consequences. Consequently, these books have primarily focused upon the armed *jihadi* groups.

The moderate Islamist currents, on their side, have largely remained academically neglected. To my knowledge, no books on the topic have been published. There has, however, been published a number of articles on the issue by writers such as Amel Boubekeur²³ and Michael Willis.²⁴

2.2 Islam and modernity

A major leitmotif in the literature on Islamism is its meeting with modernity - whether Islamism represents a “clash” or “creative meeting” with modernity. Titles such as *Islam and the modern age* or *Islam and Politics* abound in the literature from the last decades and it is astonishing to see how the supposed dichotomies “modern versus traditional” or “progressive versus backwards or obscurantist” continue to mark both the political and academic debate on the MENA region.

With great reverberation in many political circles, influential scholars like Bruce B. Lawrence, Mark Jurgensmeyer, Scott Appleby and Gilles Keppele have argued that Islamism basically should be understood as a reactionary, anti-modern force, as part of a world wide “revolt against the modern age.”²⁵ Within this perspective, Islamism is typically lumped together with other “religious fundamentalisms”, and the conclusion is that what these

²² Such as Frédéric Volpi's *Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria*, (London: Pluto Press, 2003), Roberts' *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988 - 2002, Studies in a Broken Polity* (London: Verso, 2003), Michael Willis' *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History* (Ithaca, 1999), and *An Inquiry into the Algerian Massacres* (Hoggar, 1999) edited by Bedjaoui, Arouua and Aït.Larbi, to mention a few.

²³ Boubekeur, Amel, "Political Islam in Algeria", Centre for European Policy Studies, May 2007, URL: www.appstudies.org/.../News0.8086664_Political%20Islam%20in%20Algeria.pdf, (Accessed 12.07.2009), and "L'impact de l'évolution de l'islam politique sur la cohésion nationale en Algérie", (Fondation Friedrich Ebert, Septembre 2009), and "Les Partis Islamistes algériens et la démocratie: vers une professionalization politique?" In *L'Année du Magreb*, (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2008).

²⁴ Willis, Michael, "Algeria's other Islamists: Abdallah Djaballah and the Ennahda movement", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 3, Autumn 1998, 46 - 70.

²⁵ Gilles, Keppel, *La Revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du Monde*, (Paris: Seuil, 1991) and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God, The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (London: Tauris, 1990), quoted in Bjørn Olav Utvik, "The Modernizing Force of Islamism" in *Modernizing Islam: religion in the public sphere in the Middle East and Europe*, Edited by John Espisoto and Francois Burgat, (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 43.

movements have in common - implicitly understood as their most “essential” feature - is that they reject the rationalist, scientific way of thinking propagated by the Enlightenment and defend an Absolute Truth as preserved in the Holy Scriptures.²⁶ This view of Islamism as anti-modern rests mainly on the assumption that modernisation is associated with secularisation and the retreat of religion from the public sphere.

A different understanding of the relation between Islamism and modernity may be found in *critical readings of the Western discourse on modernity*. In response to the widespread understanding of Islamism as anti-modern, and in connection with the significant shift in the political nature of many Islamist parties since the late 1990s which has not passed unnoticed, many scholars have challenged this understanding by emphasizing that the oppositions *modern* and *anti-modern* are not neutral descriptive categories. They were constructed in a political context where representations of Self and the Other are part of the political game. In line with post-modernist thought, these readings identify the Western discourse on modernity as a meta-narrative asserting western hegemony; as a reproduction of the colonial discourse, which essentializes and homogenizes constructions of “difference” between cultures and between colonisers and colonized.²⁷ From this perspective, Islamism is not essentially an anti-modern movement, but an effort at dislodging the West from the position of the centrality it claims. The typical research agenda of these writers is to point to the *modern* or *modernizing* features of Islam²⁸ and to explore the grey zones between Islamist ideology and Western normative ideas (such as the rights of women and religious minorities, the “genuineness” of their commitment to democracy, and the legitimacy of recurring to violence).

As stated in the introduction, the goal of this study is to test the hypothesis of Islamism as a modernizing force on the issue of gender relations. But how can we operationalize the term *modernizing* - with regard to women’s position - in a meaningful way? Interestingly, in spite of the frequency with which the term is being used in the existing literature, surprisingly few of the studies include a detailed explanation of what the term is understood to indicate.

²⁶ Utvik, Bjørn Olav, “The Modernizing Force of Islam”, 44.

²⁷ Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*, 3, and Nadjé Al-Ali’s, *Gender, secularism and the state in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

²⁸ Ayubi, Nazih, *The State and Public Policies in Egypt since Sadat, Political Studies of the Middle East*, (Reading: Itacha Press, 1991); Esposito, John L., *The islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Moghadam, Valentine M. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993); Utvik, Bjørn Olav, “The Modernizing Force of Islam”.

This is problematic as the term has, and continues to be, the subject of great controversy. Indeed, there exists an enormous body of literature across the entire disciplinary spectrum devoted to topics such as modernity, modernism, and theories of modernization. As such, the term represents an academic quagmire, something which may naturally partly explain the reluctance of many scholars to go into details on how they use it. This, however, has not prevented the term from becoming central in the ongoing debates on Islamism.

Despite the lack of detailed definitions, it is possible to point to certain tendencies in terms of dominant understandings. It seems that the writers who understand Islamism as incompatible with social and political modernity largely operate with highly normatively charged definitions of modernization and modernity. Judging from their conclusions, modernity is understood as synonymous with positive, arguably idealized, Western values such as democracy, human rights, and gender equality. On the other hand, the writers who focus on the *modernizing force* of Islamism tend to aspire to less normative definitions of modernity, informed mainly by historical and structural developments. Bjørn Olav Utvik, for instance, defines modernity as:

[...] historic and economic change under way in some areas of Europe since the 16th century and in the Middle East from the 19th, producing a society where market relations dominate production and exchange, where the cities contain the bulk of the population, and where industry is the dominant branch of production.²⁹

In terms of social organization, he defines *modernizing* as:

In terms of social organizations, these processes of change [...] identified as “modernizing” are generally viewed as straining primordial ties of loyalty, like those tying the individual to his family, tribe or village and placing him or her in a client relationship to a patron. Modernization then implies the increasing freedom of the individual and “horizontal” ties of voluntary association replacing the old “vertical” and organic bonds of solidarity and loyalty. By the same token, it places far greater responsibility on the individual.³⁰

Utvik thus understands the term *modernizing* - in terms of social organization - as the evolution towards a society in which the individuals are increasingly defining their own roles,

²⁹ Utvik, “The Modernizing Force of Islam”, 44.

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

through voluntary association, and in which the individuals have far more liberty (and responsibilities) than in so called traditional societies. Starting from this definition, how can we “translate” this into a workable operationalization of *modernizing* with regards to women’s position? One of the main problems connected with the operationalization of this term, with reference to normatively charged issues such as women’s position, is that the term itself seems to contain both historic and normative elements. Just as *modernizing* naturally is related to the massive social, political, technological and economic developments that have taken place during the last centuries, it also seems to necessarily contain some positive connotations; there is a significant difference in meaning between the two otherwise resembling terms *social change* and *modernizing*. An added complication is that the two are at times very difficult to separate; history is never completely void of normative interpretation. As such, even Utvik’s relatively minimalist and “historic” definition builds upon certain normative assumptions. As a result, I think it is ineffective to claim to present a value neutral definition of the term modernizing on the issue of women’s position. It should, however, be possible to point to certain key concepts that have played an important role in modern women’s history in the West. While these should not be understood as criteria for qualifying as *modern* or *modernizing* (in a normative sense), the idea is that they may serve as analytical tools for the investigation of gender issues cross-culturally: on which areas do the developments in the Islamists’ gender ideologies and practices collide or overlap with the development we have seen in the West?

As Utvik notes, increased *individualism* is a feature which is closely associated with the emergence of modern societies. As such, it is reasonable to assume that this aspect has also played a part regarding the issue of women’s role. I argue that this increased individualism has contributed to loosen the ties between the individual woman and her family, and that women’s individual roles are increasingly determined and legitimized (both by herself and by the environment) on the basis of her own efforts and capabilities rather than familial or “organic” structures. A second important process that has shaped the emergence of modern social individuals is the increased *mobilization and participation* of the masses. Mass movements are undoubtedly a particularly modern phenomenon. As such, I argue that women’s increased participation at several societal levels is a central feature of modern’s women’s history in the West. We have, in other words, seen a quite drastic enlargement of women’s traditional role; while women in pre-modern times to a large extent were confined to the domestic sphere, a characteristic feature of social modernity is that women have massively

entered the previously male-dominated public spheres such as politics and economics. Finally, I argue that *legal egalitarianism* has constituted an absolutely central topic in modern social history - first for men, then for women.

For the purposes of the present study, I have thus operationalized the term *modernizing* - with regards to gender issues - as: “A set of ideas and practices related to the concepts: *individualism*; *participation*; and *legal egalitarianism*”.

2.3 A social movement analysis approach

The present study is relevant both in term of research topic and theoretical approach. As we have seen, there is a clear knowledge gap with regard to Islamism and gender issues. Despite the fact that conflicting ideas and practices linked to gender relations constitute one of the main issues of contestation between dominant socio-cultural and political ideas in the West and those of mainstream Islamist movements, there exist few systematic studies on the changing gender ideologies and practices of Islamist movements. There is thus a need to learn more about the Islamists’ social and political ambitions with regard to women’s role, both in order to mutually dispel misconceptions about the other and to identify the real point of disagreements. This is all the more important as women generally constitute one of the most important electoral bases for Islamist movements.

Also in terms of theoretical approach, the study is relevant. By assuming a social movement analysis approach - a theoretical approach so far little used in Islamism studies despite the fact that Islamist activism may well be the most common expression of social activism worldwide - this study aims at a contextual, dynamic approach to the phenomenon and thus to avoid some of the theoretical short comings that have been identified in previous studies.

An examination of the existing body of literature on Islamism reveals that there are at least two “main critiques” against the dominant theoretical approaches. First, many of the studies are criticized for taking an *essentialist* approach. By focusing strongly on ideological factors, many studies on Islamism tend to produce static analyses and ignore the respective historical, political and social contexts in which the movements operate. Islamism is treated as a static causal variable, implicitly understood as the result of a specific “Islamic” mentality. It is particularly the tradition of “historical master narratives” within Islamism studies -

represented by thinkers such as Esposito, Voll, Keppel, Marty and Appleby - that are reproached for this *essentialism*.³¹

At the other end of the spectrum there is the critique against the widespread use of an orthodox structuralist model of explanation, in which Islamism is understood basically as a response to structural strains (whether these are understood as Western cultural imperialism; poor socio-economic conditions; or political repression).³² This tendency is represented by writers such as Ibrahim (1996), Ansari (1984), Waltz (1986) and Esposito (1998).³³ Though structural factors obviously constitute an important part of the picture, exaggerating their explanatory power leads one to ignore the symbolic and cultural issues and local specificities. As such, argues Ismail, this may hinder the linking of the macro and the micro. In a complex reality where cultural production enters into the constitution of power relations, the challenge is to connect the cultural and the structural:

The structural model of explanation is often presented as an alternative to culturalist interpretations. It is in opposing essentialism that it prevents critique of works that attribute primacy to culture, conceived as unchanging views, attitudes and norms. However, cultural practices and cultural production should not be cast aside in the interest of structural analysis. The analytical alternatives are not limited to a choice between structure and culture.³⁴

Thus, in order to avoid both the traps of essentialism and of orthodox structuralism, Ismail and Wiktorowicz recommend that we direct the analytical focus towards the *mechanisms and processes* of social activism, and try to investigate the links between the *norms* guiding social action and the specific *strategies* pursued by the actors at the micro-socio level. Social movement analysis theory seems to propose an appropriate framework for this purpose.

Social movement analysis theory can be regarded as a set of *ideas* about the functions of the different aspects of social activism, more than a coherent social movement theory. It can hardly serve as more than a compass for mapping and sorting observations that calls for explanation by other means.³⁵ The logic of the research design of the present study is therefore that central social movement analysis concepts may function as a framework to

³¹ Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism - A social Movement Theory Approach*, 3; Salwa, Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*, 2.

³² Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism - A social Movement Theory Approach*, 7; Salwa, Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*, 11 - 15.

³³ Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism - A social Movement Theory Approach*, 7 - 8.

³⁴ Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*, 15.

³⁵ Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism - A social Movement Theory Approach*, x (foreword).

structure the investigation needed to answer the research question that has been defined and specified in the previous section.

Social movement analysis identifies three main dimensions of social activism: the ideological one, the structural one and the strategic one.³⁶ The ideological dimension addresses the role of ideational factors. How is meaning produced, articulated and disseminated within a movement, and what type of interpretative schemata are used to conceptualize the actors' understanding of themselves as a collectivity as well as the "world out here"? To describe these processes of meaning constructions, Wiktorowicz uses the term "framing". The structural dimension addresses the role of contextual factors, such as opportunity and constraint structures, on a social movement's movement viability and menu of tactics, actions and choices. The strategic dimension addresses the mobilization mechanism, such as formal social movement organisation, through which individualized discontent is translated into organised contention. For the purposes of the present study, I have chosen to interpret all of these concepts quite broadly and according to my needs, rather than following a strict "formula".

The advantage, as I see it, with a social movement analysis theory is that directs the analytical focus towards the interaction between ideology and context. One of its basic assumptions is that neither ideology nor structures alone can explain politics. Rather, the two exist in an interconstitutive relationship and should thus be studied together. As such, it prevents both the reduction of Islamic activism to a "straightforward product of distinctive 'Islamic' mentalities or of a peculiar social milieu",³⁷ as well as making it easier to grasp the interaction between social movements and their environment.

Moreover, I believe that this approach may be particularly suitable to explore the topic of Islamism and gender issues. In fact, women's position arguably constitutes the ultimate case study for investigating how Islamist movements negotiate between traditional norms and contextual demands, and thus to get a better insight in the internal dynamics of Islamism. On the one hand, women's role as mother and wives is an important part of the cultural identity the Islamists draw upon. On the other hand, women's increased participation seems to be an integrated part of the Islamists program of social and political reform. Moreover, social movement analysis - with its multidimensional focus - offers an intelligible way to explore

³⁶ Ibid., 9 - 19.

³⁷ Ibid., x (foreword).

this complex issue and might be able to capture certain dynamics which would pass unnoticed in more traditional approaches.

The research design of this study will therefore be informed by the three main domains of social activism discussed above, that is, the ideological, the structural and the strategic dimensions. Three main chapters will be preceded by a general background chapter in order to further contextualize the study, and will be followed by a conclusion in which I summarize the main findings and try to link the different dimensions.

When following an interdisciplinary approach, the different steps have required different methodologies. Since only few studies of the MSP exists - and none of their gender politics - the available written material remains very limited. Most of the material upon which the present study is based was therefore gathered from a field trip to Algeria in January 2009. For the discourse analysis, I have relied mainly on qualitative, semi structured interviews with a substantial number of MSP members. With regards to the strategic dimension I have relied on interviews with MSP members, with local journalists and researchers with broad knowledge about the movement, and on official statistics. Finally, with regards to the structural dimension, I have relied on a broad selection of secondary sources such as historical and political analyses of the Algerian context.

3 Background

3.1 General historical background

During the almost fifty years that have passed since its independence, Algeria has repeatedly baffled both international and domestic observers. Few foresaw that the country in 1989 – after almost 30 years as a single-party state – seemingly overnight would abolish the old system and initiate what is considered to be the most genuine attempt at a democratic transition ever taking place in the Arab world; that Algeria's Islamist movement within a few years would rise as the strongest political challenger to the incumbent regime; or that what looked like the beginning of a democratic transition would quickly glide off into an extremely violent civil war which was to cost as much as between 100 000 and 200 000 lives. Also the current state of affairs – in reference to the successfulness of the government's deradicalization of Islamist rebel groups, the Civil Concord Law, and the status of the country's democratic transition – is a controversial topic, often subject to widely differently interpretations.

Forty eight years after independence, Algerian politics is still largely dominated - at least rhetorically - by the traumas of the colonial experience and the War of Liberation. This major event in Algerian history continues to play a central role, both symbolically and in real terms, as many of the war veterans still possess key positions in the state apparatus. Consequently, any political study of Algeria needs to consider the historical context.

3.1.1 The colonial experience and War of liberation

Algeria's colonial experience in many ways constitutes the colonial experience *par excellence*. The French occupation of Algeria (1830 - 1962) was distinctive both in terms of the intensity of foreign domination and the challenges it posed to the national identity of the population. As Algeria was considered to be "the jewel of the crown" of the French empire, the colonial power assumed a substantially different role here than in the other colonies, and their presence soon turned from military occupation to a total political, economic and social domination. Indeed, the French *mission civilisatrice* in Algeria aimed at nothing less than making Algeria an integral part of France and French citizens of Algerians. This meant the destruction and negation of the traditional cultural, social, and economic structure of the indigenous population. This was pursued through means such as the settlement of a large

European community into the country (*les pied-noirs*), the massive confiscation of lands and the restriction of Arab and Islamic education. The French aggressive assimilationist, culturalist policies to a considerable extent explains the urgency of an “authentic national identity” that has characterized Algerian politics since independence.

At the political level, one of the gravest consequences of the colonial domination was the imposition of a complex administrative apparatus designed to exclude mass participation from the management of state institutions.³⁸ Ironically, it is exactly these administrative structures – which after independence was maintained by the new regime as a means to consolidate its power and prevent the emergence of any opposition to its policies – which are most often identified as the main reason for Algeria’s “resistance to democratization” and traditions of authoritarian rule.

In 1962, after an eight year long, extremely lethal liberation war, Algeria finally won its independence. However, it was not a united leadership that took over, and a fierce competition for political power was unleashed immediately after Independence. *Front de la Libération Nationale*, FLN - the main revolutionary body that directed the war against the French and that took charge after independence - was basically an umbrella organization. As such it incorporated a broad collection of actors, often with widely contrasting political views and agendas. Emad Shahin divides between four different main currents: the assimilationists, the anti-colonial nationalists, the Islamic reformers, and, at a later phase, the revolutionaries.³⁹ In fact, there was little agreement between the different currents, except for the violent overthrow of the French. It thus soon became evident that the FLN was incapable of coming up with a unifying ideological framework for the new state, and the internal rivalry began.

3.1.2 Post independence and the civil crisis of the 1990s

With the 1965 coup d’état of Houari Boumedienne, who sat as President until 1976, it seemed that the military and revolutionary wing of the FLN had prevailed. The ideological framework of the new state was a minimalist and populist state ideology based upon three main components: Islam, socialism and development. Aware of the historical role that Islam had played throughout the nationalist movement and war of liberation, Algeria’s new ruling elite was careful to underscore the Islamic dimension of the new state. The National Charter of 1976 states that:

³⁸ Volpi, *Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria*, 19 - 20.

³⁹ Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, 25.

Islam, as an integral part of our historical identity, has proved to be one of the most powerful defences against any attempt to remove that identity. It was to Islam, militant and austere, and inspired by a sense of justice and equality, that the people of Algeria turned the worst moments of colonial rule, and from Islam it drew that moral energy and spiritual fervour which saved it from despair and enabled it to win victory.⁴⁰

In order to legitimize the choice of socialism as official state politics, socialism was presented as a natural emanation of Islam. In line with the focus on rapid comprehensive development, Algeria was established as a single-party state with the FLN as the official state party, allegedly to avoid wasting time on political contestation and thus challenge the newly won “national unity” of the country. All political activism outside the FLN framework was hence outlawed and the revolutionary army (*l’Armée de la Libération Nationale*, ALN, later, *l’Armée Nationale Populaire*, ANP) constituted the backbone of the new state.

Thanks to its rich oil resources and high level of political repression, Algeria was able to keep social and political tensions in check and appear more or less united until the end of the oil boom in the early 1980s. Together with a rapidly deteriorating material situation, social discontent and anger with the governments failed economic policies, political repression rose dramatically in the 80s and culminated in the October riots of 1988, under President Chadli Benjedid. The riots were to mark the entrance of a new era in Algerian politics. After an initial heavy handed police repression, President Benjedid decided to make a 180 degree turn, and declared that it was time to initiate comprehensive political reforms. Two days later he announced a referendum on a new constitution which laid the foundation for a political systemic change and economic liberalization: all references to socialism were removed; the economy went from state to market economy; basic human rights such as freedom of conscience and expression were guaranteed; and maybe most important, it permitted the establishment of legal opposition parties. The army’s role was reduced to that of safeguarding national independence and sovereignty.⁴¹

Within short time, a flurry of political associations and parties were created and new political actors emerged on the stage. Somewhat unexpected, the Islamist party *Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS (*al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya lil-Inqad*, the Islamic Salvation Front) soon

⁴⁰ The National Charter, quoted in Shahin’s *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, 42.

⁴¹ Werenfels, Isabelle, *Managing Instability in Algeria - Elites and Political Change since 1995* (Padstow, Cornwall: TJ International Ltd., 2007), 42.

became the main opposition faction. In the first round of Algeria's first free and fair multi party elections, in June 1990, the FIS won a landsliding victory and took home over fifty five percent of the votes. One and a half years later, in the first round of the parliamentary elections, the FIS won nearly half of the parliamentary seats (188 of 430 seats), leaving the FLN with poor fifteen seats.⁴² The second round, however, never took place as on January 11, 1992, the elections were interrupted *manu militari*. President Benjedid was forced to step down from office, the parliament was dissolved, and all legislative and executive powers were transferred to the High Security Council (*Haut Conseil de Sécurité*, HCS). The HCS announced that the electoral process was impossible to pursue under the current circumstances, suspended the second round of elections, and postponed the democratic transition until conditions were "ripe".⁴³

The army's intervention set the stage for an intense civil conflict which soon transformed into a social and political metamorphosis. Political violence began with the government's indiscriminate clamp down of Islamists and people suspected of pro-Islamist sympathies. Thousands of Islamists were killed or put into detention camps. This led to a vast radicalization of many Islamist groups and the formation of armed *jihadi* groups such as *Armée Islamique du Salut*, FIS' military wing, AIS, the *Groupement Islamique Armé*, GIA, *Mouvement Islamique Armé*, MIA, and later, the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, GSPC.⁴⁴ Over the next decade, the various Islamist groups engaged in a bloody civil conflict against the country's security forces and one another. All sides targeted civilians and perpetrated large-scale human rights abuses, causing well over 150 000 deaths and the disappearance of at least 6 000 people. Journalists and intellectuals were targeted as well; until today, few other conflicts have been as deadly for journalists.⁴⁵ As the conflict escalated it soon led to deep splits between and within the different camps. The Islamist camp was divided into radical and moderate wings, as was the new power holders who were divided into so called *éradicateurs* (those hostile to any compromise with the radical armed Islamists and in favour of their physical elimination) and the *reconciliateurs*, those ready to negotiate.

In 1997 a secret cease fire between the army and AIS, the military wing of the FIS, was negotiated. In 1999, as the fighting continued, the military-backed candidate – former

⁴² The remaining 26 seats went to the FFS, the major democratic opposition party.

⁴³ Volpi, *Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria*, 56, 64 - 65.

⁴⁴ The GSPC later renamed itself *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, AQIM.

⁴⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2009 - Algeria*, 16 July 2009, URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6452d61a.html> (Accessed 12. 03. 2009).

foreign minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika – won a presidential election after his opponents withdrew to protest alleged fraud. In 1999, Bouteflika attempted to resolve the civil war by a Civil Concorde Law, which granted partial amnesty to combatants who renounced violence. The law was ratified by an overwhelming majority of the population and political violence was substantially reduced (though the more uncompromising groups such as the GIA and the GSPC refused to surrender). Much of the legitimacy of President Bouteflika is thus connected to his reputation as “the man who brought peace back to Algeria”.⁴⁶

3.1.3 The current situation

Despite the regime’s relative success in eliminating or deradicalizing the Islamic rebel groups, and thus reduce the violence, contemporary Algeria faces a series of important challenges. Political debates are still very much marked by the excessive violence of the 1990s and how to handle the consequences. The government’s reconciliation efforts - particularly the fabrication of a public memory of the conflict and the amnesties of the Civil Concord Law - constitute a particularly contentious topic. One of the reasons is that the facts of the civil conflict are still very much disputed, especially in reference to the scope of the manipulation of the violence by the Algerian army. Indeed, a number of publications on *La sale guerre* (the dirty war) - written by former officers of the Algerian security forces - argue that armed Islamist groups, such as the GIA, responsible for numerous massacres, had been infiltrated, manipulated or even created by the security forces in order to discredit the Islamists and justify the army’s repressive measures.⁴⁷ Besides, the Civil Concorde Law - essentially offering a general amnesty to most militants and government agents for crimes committed during the civil war - is criticized for not addressing the issue of the disappeared and international human rights groups have denounced it for not allowing perpetrators to be brought to justice. Critics also maintain that the vague criteria for determining which militants could benefit from the amnesty were subject to political considerations.⁴⁸

2008 saw an increase in terrorist activity and it is clear that the FIS leaders and electorate has not been reintegrated into the political structure in a meaningful way; in the 2007 legislative elections, only 35 percent of the eligible voters (15 percent according to the

⁴⁶ Boubekour, Amel, "Lessons from Algeria's 2009 Presidential Election", Web Commentary 2009, 2, URL: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22983> (Accessed 12. 07. 2009).

⁴⁷ Werenfels, Isabelle, *Managing Instability in Algeria – Elites and political Change since 1995*, 48.

⁴⁸ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2009 - Algeria*, 16 July 2009, URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6452d61a.html> (Accessed 12. 03. 2009).

opposition) bothered to cast their ballots.⁴⁹ The regime's legitimacy is questioned on the basis of a series of negative developments. The regime has proved unable to reform the institutions and economy; among the population under 30 years of age, the unemployment rate is at outrageous 75 percent.⁵⁰ As a result, a rising number of young people flee the country as illegal immigrants. Moreover, in terms of political rights and civil liberties there are a number of worrying aspects. Despite the announced relaunch of the democratic transition in 1995 and the inclusion of political opposition parties in government since 1997, the opposition parties seem to remain largely irrelevant, and elections continue to be marked by fraud and irregularities. The 2009 Presidential elections are a good example. In November 2008, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika succeeded in voting through a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for a third term in 2009. April 9, 2009, he was re-elected with 90, 2 percent of the votes, with an official participation rate at 74, 5 percent. These figures are far too high to be credible, compared with the official turnout in the 2007 parliamentary elections. The opposition estimated that only about 24 % of eligible voters had in fact cast their ballots, and several of the main opposition parties boycotted the elections. Saïd Sadi, RCD President (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*), said that "participating in this pathetic and dangerous circus would be tantamount to complicity in an operation of national humiliation".⁵¹ In the purpose of granting legitimacy to the 2009 elections, Bouteflika's had requested international observers. However, as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the US and the EU had sent observers in 1999 and 2004, but remained unable to prevent election fraud, they decided not to participate this time. After the announcement of Bouteflika's victory, the US expressed concern over allegations of fraud, but refused to comment further.⁵²

Other negative aspects include: the continuing state of emergency (which have been in force since 1992) that limits free expression and associations; the government's tight control over local television and radio broadcast as well as of the judiciary institutions; the poor human rights situation (the country's security forces are regularly accused by human rights associations of practicing torture); and finally, the continued discrimination against women

⁴⁹ Boubekeur, Amel, "Lessons from Algeria's 2009 Presidential Election", 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁵¹ Algiers AFP, "Algerian opposition pulls out of 'pathetic' presidential vote" URL: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jI1Crc3dM4TjP7NncwbLBC-1bFSg> (Accessed 12.07.2009).

⁵² Boubekeur, Amel, "Lessons from Algeria's 2009 Presidential Election", 2.

both at the legal and societal levels.⁵³ On the basis of these observations, Freedom House in 2009 categorized Algeria as “not free”. Boubekour writes that:

Bouteflika’s re-election has proved that he can control the electoral process, but it is unlikely to give him the national and international legitimacy he craves [...] The large number of young people who boycotted the elections in particular need jobs and a future, and has no interest in the regime’s old mythologies of security, terrorism and revolution. If election promises of stability leads to stagnation again, Algerians may become more disinterested in official politics than they already are and attempt to bring about reform through violence, as happened in 1988.⁵⁴

3.2 Islamism in Algeria

The strong emergence of Algerian Islamism after the political opening of 1989 masks its long term presence in the Algerian political landscape. Modern Algerian Islamist movements have their roots in the independence struggle. During the War of Independence, religion was a central means for the FLN - which later came to be seen as a secular, socialist-orientated party - to acquire political legitimacy. The anti-colonial struggle was labelled a *jihad*, and once independence was achieved, the prerequisite for those who wanted to acquire positions of power was to have been a wartime *mujahid* (literally a fighter for faith).⁵⁵ As such, the modern Islamists movements’ claim of historical continuity constitutes one of their strongest assets in their struggle for political power.

3.2.1 The *Ulama* movement and the War of liberation

As we have seen (p. 22), in Algeria - unlike Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco - the Islamic reformers or the *Ulama* movement aligned with the nationalist during the liberation struggle against the French. The founder of the Algerian *Ulama* movement, Ben Badis, and his *Association of Algerian Scholars* became an important source of popular respect and legitimacy to the FLN. Mohammad Arkoun writes that:

⁵³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2009 - Algeria*, 16 July 2009, URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6452d61a.html> (Accessed 12. 03. 2009).

⁵⁴ Boubekour, "Lessons from Algeria’s 2009 Presidential Election", 3.

⁵⁵ Boubekour, Amel, "Salafism and Radical Politics in Postconflict Algeria", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008, 4. URL: <http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/ceip/0007796/index.html> (Accessed 12. 08. 2009).

After independence, all expressions of Islam were more or less affected by the spirit and teachings of the 'Ulama' movement. The constant references made to Ben Badis and his successor, al-Shaykh al-Ibrahimi, by Algerian officials is evidence of the impact of the Ulama movements views had on Algerian Islam.⁵⁶

After independence, the *Ulama* movement was represented in the provisional government of the Algerian Republic (Gouvernement provisoire de la République Algérienne, GPRA). However, within short time, as the military and revolutionary wing of the FLN took over and declared a socialist and secularist orientation, the influence of the *Ulama* (together with other currents) was dramatically reduced. However, given their symbolic importance and unifying rationale, the new leadership adapted the rhetoric of the *Ulama* movement, while in fact politically marginalising the religious elites. "Official Islam", writes Hugh Roberts, hence became "the cult of the will of the government".⁵⁷ Much like the colonial powers, the new leadership of Algeria, tried to monopolize and nationalize religion.

According to Shahin, the nationalization and monopolization of religion took place on three different levels. *Ideologically*, the new leadership incorporated the discourse of the *Ulama* movement as the official religious ideology of the state and presented themselves as the only legitimate heir of Ben Badis and the reformist scholars. *Institutionally*, religion was monopolized by placing religious affairs under the government's civil service bureaucracy; this way, institutions like the Supreme Islamic Council and the Ministry of Religious Affairs were given a visible, but marginal role. *Politically*, the Algerian regime took measures to undermine any opposition to its policy on religious grounds and prevent the rise of autonomous religious figures.⁵⁸ In 1964 the Association of Algerian Scholars was dissolved on the basis that the association was no longer needed as its message had been incorporated as the official religious ideology of the state. In 1966, Boumedienne's regime banned all religious publications - except for those issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs - and religious scholars who opposed the state's secular politics were either sent to exile or confined to house arrest.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Mohammad Arkoun, "Algeria", in Shireen Hunter (ed.), *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism: Diversity and Unity* (Indiana University Press, 1989), quoted in Shahin's *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, 28.

⁵⁷ Roberts, Hugh. *The Battlefield, Algeria 1988-2002: Studies in a Broken Polity* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 18.

⁵⁸ Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, 42 - 47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

Yet, in spite of their efforts, the regime did not succeed to entirely prevent opposition on religious grounds. As Werenfels puts it, "Outside this 'official Islam', a contesting Islam' in time developed among those religious forces – the *Ulama* and others – that had been sidelined in the later years of the Revolution".⁶⁰

3.2.2 The emergence of modern Islamist movements

During the 1980s the figures that were to dominate the politicized religious landscape in the late 80s and throughout the 90s started to emerge publicly (like FIS leaders Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj and MSP's Mahfoud Nahnah). Their semi-clandestine political activity and increasing popularity was a main reason for the official discourse to slowly change from socialist to religious in the Chadli-era and for making concessions to conservative and Islamist elites in the 1984 family code.⁶¹ In line with failed economic policies, socialism was gradually seen as an alien concept to the Algerian society and Islam was gradually emerging as the only legitimate component of Algerian national identity. Islamist leaders like Madani and Belhadj effectively profited upon the general discontent and positioned themselves in the centre of the October 1988 riots, which led to the political opening only one year after.

FIS

After the political opening, the FIS was the first Islamic party to register and the party enjoined an immediate success. In April 1990, just one year after its creation, during the campaigns for the local elections, the FIS attracted between 600 000 and 800 000 to a massive political rally. This was something no other political party, not even the FLN was close to achieve.

The FIS was a coalition of a large and heterogeneous collection of Islamic-oriented groups and personalities. As a political front it encompassed elements from most of the Islamic organizations that had existed since the mid 1970s such as traditionally-minded religious leaders, as well as reformists of the *ikhwani*⁶² type and radicals inspired by

⁶⁰ Werenfels, *Managing Instability in Algeria – Elites and political change since 1995*, 41.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The term *ikhwani* is used to describe the "legalist" Islamist currents which "want to work with peaceful methods within the existing legal framework and/or seek to apply pressure to change the legal regime so that it will allow for legal competition for power." Source: "Islamist Movements in the Middle East: Challenging the

contemporary *salafi*⁶³ tendencies. The party's immediate success was at least partly related to the charismatic leadership of the moderate reformist Abbasi Madani and the radical young schoolteacher and preacher Ali Belhadj, who had become publicly known during the October riots. Madani was a veteran from the Liberation War (and had spent five years imprisoned by the French) and Belhadj was the son of a martyr. Both were highly educated; Madani, the son of a religious teacher and Imam, had received religious training in Bikra and held a British Doctoral Degree in comparative education, and Belhadj had been educated by prominent religious scholars such as Abdel Latif Sultani, Ahmed Sahnoun, and Omar Arabaoui.⁶⁴

The FIS thus consisted of both moderate and radical currents with widely diverging views both with regards to the appropriate means and specific content of their pronounced political goal: the creating of an Islamic state. This led to their leading of a relatively populist, yet ambiguous discourse with regards to their political program and position towards issues such as the legitimacy of democracy as ruling principle. Their main rationale was to present themselves as the true inheritors of the Algerian revolution, which had been hijacked by military and revolutionary currents. Their quick rise was also the result of the FIS's tactics of articulating demands and pressing for their attainment through the mobilization of the "street".

However, as is known, the army intervened in January 1992 and called off the second round of elections. They rapidly followed up with a ban on the FIS which led to the total suppression of the FIS as a civil movement in Algeria, and forced many of its active members into exile. This encouraged the FIS to join the armed struggle against the regime, and the AIS was eventually founded. The ban on the FIS is still in force today.

The moderate wing

Independent from the FIS, Islamist movements like MSP and the *Nahda* movement - now split in two main currents, the *Nahda* proper and the *Mouvement du Renouveau Nationale*, MNR (*Harakat al-Islah al Watani*, or *el-Islah*) - remained legally active after the FIS was banned in 1992. From 1992 they participated in numerous efforts by both the Algerian government and the opposition to restart Algeria's political life and to bring an end to growing

Autocrats", Report June 2008 Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS), University of Oslo, 9.

⁶³ A common feature of the highly diverse Salafi currents are that they emphasize a traditional, often literal, interpretation of Islamic mores and codes of conduct. Salafi literally means "the way of the ancestors." Source: Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴ Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa*, 129 - 132.

violence. Both the MSP and the *Nahda* movement started out as clandestine, Muslim Brotherhood inspired associations in the 1970s, and all three parties are currently represented in Parliament.⁶⁵

The MSP was created in 1990 and is the official wing of the international Muslim Brotherhood in Algeria. The party's history is closely associated with that of its founder, Mahfoudh Nahnah. Nahnah was a teacher of Arabic and started his preaching activities in the late 1970s. An opponent of the Boumedienne regime, in 1977 he carried out sabotage operations and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Pardoned by the following President, Chadli Benjedid, Nahnah was then reported by various sources to have made a commitment to the security services to become less extreme in his preaching.

Following the October 1988 riots, Nahnah was asked by Ali Belhadj to take part in setting up the FIS. Nahnah refused on the basis that it was too radical and instead decided to initiate his own association, Guidance and Reform (*Al-Irshad wa-l-Islah*), largely financed by the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. This association was seen as a non-political organisation for religious education, preaching and charity work. In 1990, one year after the political opening, the association became a political party under the name *Mouvement pour une Société Islamique*, MSI (*Harakatali-Mujtama' al-Islami*, abbreviated in Arabic as Hamas), but following a legal ban on religiously founded parties, the name was changed to the *Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix*, MSP.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, MSP has focused on cooperating with the state. In contrast to the FIS, the MSP has advocated a much more gradual transition towards an Islamic society, one in which the incumbent regime should not be seen as adversaries to be overcome or even eradicated, but as partners in the reform process. While the MSP condemned the military coup and subsequent banning of the FIS, they also clearly condemned the Islamist insurgency that followed. The MSP thus remained a legal political organization, and ran in all elections organized by the state while the ex-FIS and other rebel groups urged a boycott. This intermediary position cost the MSP the lives of nearly 50 senior party members, who were killed in terrorist acts.⁶⁶

In 1995, Nahnah was invited by the Algerian regime to re-launch the democratic process and decided to take part in the presidential elections. Nahnah finished second with 25, 38 percent of the vote, after the military backed winning candidate Liamine Zeroual. Two

⁶⁵ MSP is by far the largest, holding 52 (out of 389 seats) whereas the MRN and Ennahda hold respectively three and five seats.

⁶⁶ Boubekour, Amel, "Political Islam in Algeria", 2.

years later, in the 1997 legislative elections, the MSP officially secured nearly 14, 9 percent of the votes and 69 seats, becoming the second largest political party in the country. Since, 1997, the MSP has been part of different ruling coalitions and is today member of the Presidential Alliance, comprised of the MSP, the FLN and the RND.

In the 2002 legislative elections the MSP scored only 7 % of the votes and 30 seats, half the number of seats that it had had in 1997. Yet, in the 2007 legislative elections the party again scored a notable progress, coming in third in number of votes (9, 64 percent) increasing its number of seats to 52. Rather than launching its own candidates in the Presidential elections of 2002 and 2009, the party has supported the candidate of the governing coalition, Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

In parliament and in government the party has tried to strengthen Islamic trends in state and society, for instance by opposing secularizing changes in the Algerian Family Code. It has argued in favor of amnesties and reconciliation efforts towards former Islamist guerillas while supporting the state in its confrontation with radical groups. In 2003, Mahfoudh Nahnah died and was replaced by Aboujerra Soltani.

During the last years, the party has suffered from severe internal party struggles for the chairmanship. The 4th MSP Congress was marked by an internecine power struggle between the party's National Executive Office that supported the incumbent leader, Aboujerra Soltani and the party's Consultative Body, supporting Abdelmadjid Menasra, previous Vice-president of the party. The main bone of contention seems to be Menasra's wing accusing Soltani's wing of an overly compromising approach to the government; Menasra describes the MSP's as an "orphan within the government".⁶⁷ The conflict escalated in Menasra officially leaving the party in April 2009 and creating a new party, *Mouvement pour la prédication et le changement*, MPC. Carnegie Endowment reported that more than 560 of the MSP's female members resigned from the party in early May to join Menasra's movement, accusing the MSP of rigidity, and the "failure of all attempts to give advice, amend, reform and reach accord, in respect to the party's continued pursuit of politics inconsistent with the party's ideology".⁶⁸ Yet, these numbers are refused by the MSP's head office that denies having received any resignations.

⁶⁷ Boulkemh, Abderrezak, Belamri, Samira and Boukhemkhem, Abdenour, Echorouk Online News, URL: <http://www.echoroukonline.com/eng/index.php?print&news=606>, (Accessed 08. 20. 2009).

⁶⁸ Carnegie Endowment, "Women Leave Islamist Party". URL: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=23069> (Accessed 08. 20. 2009).

3.2.3 The impact and role of Islamist contenders in the current setting

The mainstream Islamist movements in Algeria can be broadly divided into two tendencies according to their position towards Algerian official political life. On the one side, one finds the scattered and disorganized remnants of the FIS. Despite the lack of an organized legal presence, many observers consider the FIS legacy to represent a "silent majority" of Algerian Islamists.⁶⁹ On the other side are the legal, and smaller, Islamist parties the MSP, the MRN and the Ennahda. Due to the dramatic and bloody recent history in Algeria, the mutual bitterness between these competing tendencies naturally runs much deeper than in other countries with similar features.

It seems probable that the impact of the MSP and the other legal Islamist parties remains limited at the best, as the inclusion of Islamist opposition parties in the official politics is part of the government's strategy to domesticate and neutralize the Islamist opposition.⁷⁰ The real electoral power of other contesting Islamist forces is hard to evaluate as these groups cannot operate freely and choose to keep a low profile.

Today, while the FIS remains a powerful symbol for large parts of Algerian public opinion, the party has no united organizational presence, neither inside the country, where it is still forbidden, nor in exile. Yet, as the regime recognizes the importance of somehow reintegrating the FIS electorate into the formal political processes, the FIS continue to play an indirect role in Algerian politics. This was exemplified during the 1999 presidential elections and in the referendum for the Civil Concorde Law; during both these events, the Algerian regime put great emphasis on getting the support of the FIS leadership, as they viewed it as crucial in both offering them broad legitimacy and for the reintegration of parts of the FIS electorate.⁷¹

3.3 Women's history

Women were another group which was systematically excluded from political power shortly after independence. Despite the participation of more than 10 000 women during the war of liberation against the French – which led to widespread expectations of improvement of their social and political position – women were quickly relegated to their domestic roles by

⁶⁹ Utvik and Tønnessen, "Islamist Movements in the Middle East: Challenging the Autocrats", 19.

⁷⁰ Boubekeur, Amel, "Political Islam in Algeria".

⁷¹ Werenfels, *Managing Instability in Algeria – Elites and political change since 1995*, 71.

successive post-independence governments. This stance was officially justified in the name of Algeria's national identity as a Muslim nation and based on a quest to affirm Algerian culture wherein women traditionally played a subservient role.⁷²

Almost fifty years after independence, women's expectations remain largely unfulfilled and the question of their legal status as well as their private and public role is a central issue in today's Algeria. The debate of women's role dates back to the foundation of the Algerian nation state in 1962 and is intertwined in the process of defining a national, post-colonial identity, a political direction and a path for economic development.

3.3.1 The Algerian revolution and the 'Moudjahidates'

The heroic woman fighter, the *moudjahidate*, remains the most powerful myths in Algerian women history. This model of Algerian womanhood became particularly important to the 1960s and 70s generation of Algerians, particularly university women, in their work to promote women's rights.

When the FLN was formed, there was no provision for women to enjoy any political or military responsibilities. Nevertheless, military exigencies soon forced the officers of the *Armée de la Libération Nationale* (ALN) to use some women combatants. Upwards of 10 000 women participated in the Algerian Revolution. The overwhelming majority of those who served in the war were nurses, cooks, and laundresses. But many women played an indispensable role as couriers, and because the French rarely searched them, women were often used to carry bombs.⁷³ Among the heroines of the Algerian Revolution were Djamila Bouhired (the first woman sentenced to death), Djamila Bouazza, Jaqueline Guerroudj, Zahia Khalfallah, Baya Hocine, Djoher Akrouir and Hassiba Ben Bouali, who was killed in the Kasbah.

The participation of these women led to widespread optimism and expectations with regards to their social and political status. In *A dying colonialism*, published in 1959, Franz Fanon suggests that because of women's participation in the revolution, Algeria would be forever changed in its socio-cultural relations.⁷⁴ Additionally, there were a set of indicators

⁷² Gray, Doris, H. "Women in Algeria Today and the Debate over Family Law", Meria Journal, URL: <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2009/03/gray.html>, (Accessed 12. 08. 2009).

⁷³ Moghadam, Valentine M., *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), 93.

⁷⁴ Knauss, Peter R., "Algerian Women Since Independence" in *State and Society in Algeria*, Edited by John P. Entelis and Phillip C. Naylor (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 151.

that women were heading for a more equal position. Immediately after the war, as the heroines of the revolution were being hailed throughout the country, the September 1962 constitution guaranteed equality between the sexes and granted women the right to vote. Ten women were elected deputies of the new National Assembly, and one of them, Fatima Khemisti, drafted a significant legislation to affect the status of women after independence. Shortly after, the *Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes* (UNFA) was formed.

However, more conservative and patriarchal tendencies were also at work during and after the Algerian revolution, and it soon became clear that the emancipation of Algerian nation did not mean the emancipation of the Algerian woman. The nationalist consensus tied women to the home and family, and insisted that the recuperation of the Algerian national identity had to start with the recuperation of the Algerian family along Arab-Islamic lines. Mohammed Khider (a politician who played an important role in the FLN during the Revolution, mainly by representing the party externally) made the viewpoints of the FLN on this issue very clear; when asked about a possible change in women's role after independence, he said that she could return to her couscous (*"que la femme fasse le couscous et nous la politique"*).⁷⁵ The nationalist consensus seemed to be that the war had created a national crisis that warranted extreme tactics and that women now should return to the home and be good Muslim mothers and wives in the national effort to rebuild the Algerian family.

This line was maintained by successive post-independence governments, something which resulted in an effective exclusion of women from political power as well as a severe deterioration of their socio-economic and demographic condition. The Boumedienne government's policies on demographic growth and gender led to a situation in the 60s where more than 73 percent of the girls were married at the age of 20 and in which the fertility rate was at 6, 5 children. At the end of the Boumedienne regime, 97, 5 percent of Algerian women were without paid work. On the positive side, the state sponsored free education for both genders.⁷⁶

3.3.2 Women during the civil conflict

A second "major" event in modern Algerian women's history in Algeria is of course their enormous sufferance during the civil crisis of the 1990s. During this conflict, much of the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁷⁶ Moghadam, Valentine M., *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 95.

violence was in fact directly targeting women. Many were threatened, assaulted or even killed in public for not wearing the veil. Gang rapes and public aggressions especially against women living alone occurred frequently. Whether the result of Islamic extremism or false flag operations by the security forces remains a debated issue; regardless, the long term effect on women's lives and appropriate compensation remain major, not solved issues. In the report "Briefing to the Committee to End all Discrimination Against Women", Amnesty International reports of three major concerns in reference to the ongoing violence against women in Algeria: the sexual violence perpetrated by members of military groups and non-state actors; the collateral impact on women issued from the state violence against their husbands; and finally, violence within the family. The report also addresses the problems related to the general impunity of these atrocities.⁷⁷

3.3.3 The current situation

The current status of women in Algeria today is one of paradoxes, both in terms of legal framework and structural tendencies. Legally speaking, Algerian women are in essence subdued to two parallel sets of laws: The criminal and civil law, which is primarily based upon French legislation, and Islamic-sanctioned laws on matters of citizenship, nationality and family code. The Algerian family Code (adopted in 1984, 22 years after independence) is considered to be one of the most conservative in the Arab world and has been the subject of fierce contestations and protests on the part of female NGOs. Also after its partial revision in 2005, the Algerian family code remains the major bone of contention in the Algerian gender debate.

The most contested areas of the 1984 Code was that it: stipulated that Algerian women be given in marriage by a *Wali* (a male legal guardian or tutor); deprived women of the right to divorce except in specific cases, thus restoring divorce as a male prerogative; and gave men the right to polygamy and to repudiate their wives. Moreover, with respect to child custody, the Code allowed that the children of divorced parents could stay with the mother until the age of 6 for boys and 10 for girls, provided the ex husband was satisfied with her method or child rearing. Otherwise he could claim them, as the father was the official guardian. Mothers

⁷⁷ Amnesty International, "Algérie - Briefing au Comité sur l'élimination de toutes les formes de discrimination à l'égard des femmes (décembre 2004)". URL: <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/info/MDE28/011/2004> (Accessed 10.11. 2009), 1.

could not remarry without losing their children and had to live close enough to their ex-husbands to enable them to exercise their right to control the children's education. Finally, women were to be given just half of a man's share of inheritance.⁷⁸

The 2005 revision provided certain improvements. The position of divorced women with children was strengthened by giving them the right to stay in their former conjugal homes; forced marriages were outlawed; and polygamy constrained by requiring consent of the first or second wife and a validation by a local court. Women were no longer legally required to be obedient to their husbands. However, the concept of a mandatory *Wali*, a male legal guardian, was affirmed - the legal reform merely allowed a woman to *choose* her own guardian. Yet, the large majority of human rights and feminist associations are far from satisfied and demand that the Code be substantially reformed or abolished.

However, there is also another side to the overall image of women's situation in contemporary Algeria. While legal ambiguity remains a crucial factor in the gender debate, there exist important indicators of change at the structural level, in terms of the number of women in the work force, and higher education. In an article for the New York Times, Slackman writes that "Algerian women are emerging as an economic and political force unheard of in the rest of the Arab world".⁷⁹ Women make up more than 70 percent of Algeria's lawyers and 60 percent of its judges, and they dominate in medicine. Moreover, they are increasingly contributing more to household income than men. As over 60 percent of the University students are women, it is safe to assume that even though only half of these enter the work force, Algerian gender relations will be significantly altered. "If such a trend continues," says Daho Djerbal, editor and publisher of *Naqd*, a magazine of social criticism and analysis, "we will see a new phenomenon where our public administration will be controlled by women."⁸⁰

The current gender debate in Algeria is mainly shaped by two opposing forces, namely Islamists and secular women's and human rights associations. As Grey points out, the main difference between the two categories is that while secular women's activists focus primarily on legal matters, the Islamists, on their side, focus on grassroots vocational programs, literacy

⁷⁸ Moghadam, Valentine M., *Gender and National Identity. Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, (London: Zed Books, 1994), 163.

⁷⁹ Slackman, Michael, "A Quiet Revolution: Gains by Women", New York Times, 05. 26. 2007.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

campaigns and religious instruction.⁸¹ Secular women's associations battle to uphold the supremacy of the constitution, and advocate either a substantive reform, abolition of the code, or demand that woman obtain the right to choose between laws. Islamist women activists on the other hand hold that religious law is divinely inspired and therefore non-negotiable. They believe that domestic violence and abuse of women would disappear if people behaved in accordance with the tenets of their faith. Therefore, religious instruction, not a change of laws, was considered of paramount importance. However, they argue that the current family code is not based upon a proper understanding of Islam – yet there is little consensus about the specifics of a proper understanding.⁸²

As a consequence of Algeria's recent bloody history - and in particular as a result of the Islamist launched violence against women - secular and Islamic women's organisations have so far identified little common ground.

⁸¹ Gray, Doris, H. "Women in Algeria Today and the Debate over Family Law", Meria Journal, URL: <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2009/03/gray.html>, (Accessed 12. 08. 2009).

⁸² Ibid.

4 The ideological dimension

Ideology is a significant dimension of social activism, though in itself not sufficient to explain the complex evolution of a social movement. Mapping and analyzing the MSP's gender ideology is therefore an important step in the process of assessing whether the movement can be said to exercise a modernizing effect on gender roles.

Social movement analysis assumes that the main purpose of ideology is to construct a common basis - referred to as *frames* - for understanding and interpreting reality. Ideology is primarily expressed through political discourse to the movement's audiences, such as the media, (social and political) elites, sympathetic allies, and potential recruits. Successful frames often draw upon shared cultural understandings. In order to achieve this, three main tasks need to be successfully accomplished. First, the movement needs to present a credible *diagnosis* of the present situation that resonates with its target groups. This includes the definition of the problem that has to be dealt with, as well as its sources. Second, the movement needs to present a *solution* that is understood as appropriate and viable within the relevant audiences. Finally, the movement needs to provide their target groups with a *rationale* - while a social movement may be met with sympathy among a large audience, how does it transform its sympathizers from passive listeners to active participants? Social movement analysis theory suggests that frequently used strategies in order to "push" potential supporters over this last barrier includes drawing upon cultural or ideological rationales such as religion, language, ethnicity, and other types of identity constructions and/or dividing lines.⁸³

The present analysis of the MSP's gender discourse will thus be structured according to the discursive tasks outlined above. The ideological dimension is an especially interesting part of the study because no previous studies on the MSP's gender ideology has been conducted. As a result, there does not exist, to my knowledge, any analysis of this issue. As regards the primary material, the only written statements of the MSP about women's position that I have been able to identify is a brief section in Nahnah's party pamphlet for the 1995 presidential elections, "Le Programme Alternatif" (*the alternative program*). The present section is therefore principally based upon interviews with central party members, spokespersons and female activists.

⁸³ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *Islamic Activism - A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 16.

4.1 The diagnosis

The position of women in many Arab countries is an indication of the level of intellectual regression that has taken place.⁸⁴

The MSP emphasizes that the position of women, both in Algeria and in the Arab world in general, is in need of substantial improvement, to the extent that MSP's 1995 party program identifies as one of the party's main goals to work for the Algerian woman's "social and political rehabilitation". According to the MSP women in general do no longer enjoy the status and position they are entitled to and that they are attributed by Islam. The members point to several symptoms of women's deteriorating status. To a large extent women have been confined to the domestic sphere and denied participation in other societal spheres, such as in politics and commerce. Discriminating laws and lack of political representation have made women a vulnerable group, who is easily exploited and whose rights need better protection. The members also point to widespread hostile and repressive traditions, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse.

The MSP understands Algerian women's deteriorated situation mainly as the result of two interconnected historical processes: a general intellectual regression that has taken place in the Arab world; and Western colonialism and cultural imperialism.

In the early days of Islam, women ran their own businesses and played a central role in politics. The Prophet himself was employed by his wife. And today, in Saudi Arabia, women aren't even allowed to have a driving license! To us, this resembles a caricature.⁸⁵

The MSP members argue that while Islamic societies in the "Golden Age" were characterized by tolerance and equality among men, many present day Muslim communities seem to be characterized by quite the opposite. Many Muslims communities project a rigid and strict interpretation of Islam. According to the interviewees, this tendency is visible not only with regards to the position of women, but in all types of societal questions such as the rights of religious minorities or with regards to science.

⁸⁴ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahman, First Secretary of the MSP (Algiers, January 2009).

⁸⁵ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene, central MSP politician (Algiers, January 2009).

When Europe was in the Middle Ages, Muslim philosophy had its Enlightenment. Now on the other hand, the smallest sign of independent thinking that differs from the orthodoxy is immediately denounced.⁸⁶

The MSP members further argue that this intellectual regression must be seen in connection with Western colonialism and cultural imperialism.

*Ijtihad*⁸⁷ has always been a proper Islamic feature. It is the obscure periods, like colonialism, that has weakened the place for *ijtihad* and imposed a much more closed and rigid vision of Islam. We believe that Islam must be liberated from this development.⁸⁸

The West's brutal interference and domination had devastating consequences on the Muslim communities, economically, politically and socially. This was especially the case in Algeria, where the French colonizers pursued a particularly brutal and comprehensive colonialist strategy. One of the main consequences, according to the MSP members, was that it led to social imbalance and a distorted relationship between the genders. In order to protect and distance themselves from the colonizers, many Muslims responded with an overly restrictive and conflicting interpretation of Islam. This especially played out on the issue of the family and women's position, where exaggerated patriarchal values became the main signals of a symbolic distance taking from the colonizers' liberal way of life. The MSP members argue that this development, though understandable in light of the circumstances, marks a derailment from true Islamic principles, which guarantee women and men equal rights.

Not only the French but also the postcolonial ruling elites are blamed for contributing to a distorted relationship between the genders. In his 1995 party program, Nahnah links the deteriorating situation for Algerian women to what he understands to be *the* fundamental problem in Algerian politics (and thus also the deepest reason for the crisis of the 1990s): the legitimacy problem of the successive post independence regimes. In fact, it is interesting to compare Nahnah's 1995 party pamphlet and the current discourse of central MSP spokespersons concerning the reasons for the deteriorating position of Algerian women. While Nahnah largely blamed the post colonial regime, current politicians tend to point to the

⁸⁶ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahman, (Algiers, January 2009).

⁸⁷ *Ijtihad* signifies individual interpretative efforts, most often in terms of legal reasoning.

⁸⁸ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene, (Algiers, January 2009).

colonial experiences. The position of the latter can arguably be explained in connection with the MSP's evolution from being a opposition party to joining the political establishment.

According to Nahnah, the fundamental roots of the "Algerian problem" are the post independence development, where "a minority seized power and marginalized the people."⁸⁹ This monopolization of power created a gap between state and society. At the political level, the nationalist and Islamic currents have been excluded at the benefit of the secular one. At the ideological level, the pro-Western assimilationist current has marginalized the one focusing on authenticity and continuity. At the social and cultural level, these developments have had very negative consequences, as an "intrusive culture has developed at the costs of the authentic culture".⁹⁰ This has particularly affected the relationship between the genders:

At the social level, this has materialized as an increased imbalance between the genders. Algerian history, religion and traditions appeal to equal rights and complementary functions for men and women. But lately, women have found themselves prohibited to exercise the activities where she is most free to use her creativity. She has been subdued to the most constraining tasks, without any consideration to her nature or vocation. She has been the victim of a humiliating behavior that has denied her, with few exceptions, to have a role in the national edification process.⁹¹

This citation describes well the ambiguity and intermediary position of the MSP towards the question of women's role and rights. On the one hand, there is a condemnation of the repressive traditions in Algerian society that have contributed to hinder women to assume a public and visible role. On the other hand, it is clear that the MSP's vision of the ideal gender relations is substantially different from that of the secularist. For example, Nahnah's emphasis on concepts such as *complimentarity* and women's *nature* and *vocation* indicates that the MSP assumes a quite more essentialist and identity focused approach to gender issues than most secularists.

As we can see, the MSP does to a large extent explain the current state of affairs of women's role and position within the larger framework of external challenges faced by the Algerian nation as a whole. It is emphasized that political instability and foreign interference have distorted the natural balance and harmony between the genders. Even more, it is emphasized that Islam is not the problem.

⁸⁹ Cheikh Mahfoud Nahnah, "Le Programme Alternatif", Elections Presidentielles 16 Novembre 1995, 7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁹¹ Ibid., 20, (my translation).

It is the traditions that have led us to the situation where women no longer have the position they deserve. And this is where we must start when liberating the women: with the traditions, which in fact, many of them, do not have anything to do with Islam.⁹²

Noureddine Ait Messaoudene thus argues that, on the contrary, the problem is that Algeria has so far not managed to establish a social order based on the true Islamic principles and an authentic Algerian identity. The power holders have not allowed Islam to play a truly central role. The MSP members are thus critical towards both radical Islamists and radical secularists. The secularists are accused of trying to impose a Western orientated system, which is basically incompatible with what is understood as the authentic identity of the Algerian woman. As such it threatens the basic building unit in Algerian society, namely the family. The radical Islamists, on the other hand, are accused of projecting a paternalistic and discriminating interpretation of Islam which is also a threat to the natural balance between the genders that ideally should reign in Algerian society.

4.2 The solution

“The golden middle”?

In short, the solution proposed by the MSP to improve women’s situation is to restore the natural balance between the genders. This involves a return to, and rereading of Islamic law, *Sharia*. *Sharia* and *ijtihad* are thus the central concepts in the MSP solution to the “women problem”. Islamic family law is understood as a condition for the successful improvement of women’s status. Yet, in order to serve the needs of contemporary Algerian women, the *Sharia*-based family law needs to be subjected to *ijtihad*. It is, however, difficult to get a clear impression of how flexible *Sharia* is and how far *ijtihad* can go in its reinterpretation of the Islamic family law: What are the negotiable and the non-negotiable topics?

Authenticity and progress - *Sharia* and *ijtihad*

According to the MSP, Islamic principles and values should constitute the moral and organizational foundation of all levels of Algerian society. Islam is considered to be the most authentic and uniting feature of the Algerian national identity and thus the key to successful

⁹² Interview with Noureddine Ait Messaoudene, (Algiers January 2009).

political and social reform. The implicit assumption is that if Islamic principles had in fact been properly respected and practices, Algerian society would automatically restore its natural balance and prosper.

As a response to both the secularist and radical Islamists “flawed” solutions to gender issues, the MSP tries to take an intermediary position and to present themselves as the proponents of golden middle. (The MSP’s ambition to represent a “third way” is well reflected in the title of Nahnahs’s 1995 party pamphlet: “the alternative program”.)

The dual solution proposed by the MSP to improve women’s situation is to avoid extremes and harmoniously wed cultural authenticity and societal progress through the *Sharia* and *ijtihad*. On the one hand, the MSP considers female participation in the public sphere as integrative part of societal progress. On the other hand, the strive for authenticity will be satisfied by remaining faithful to the Islamic references with regards to women’s role. The dual proposition of the MSP is thus to help women to assume a more active and participatory role, while simultaneously re-establishing an *authentic* Islamic moral in terms of family relations and social organization.

Women in Islam - complementarity and justice rather than equality

Beyond slogans such as “Women have a central role in Islam” and “Islam guarantees men and women equal rights”, it is extremely difficult to comprehend what type of concrete guidelines Islam - according to the MSP - sets out for women’s role and status. What does a return to the frequently mentioned *true Islamic principles* involve in terms of social and political regulations of women’s situation? In the following I have tried to outline the main narrative.

The MSP members emphasize that women have a central place in Islam, that she is the man’s equal and has the right to occupy whatever position she wishes. However, women’s importance is intrinsically linked to her role within the family; her most essential roles are that of mother and wife. Considered to be the corner stone of the family, the basic unit in Muslim societies, she has a special responsibility for its preservation – educating the children, taking care of the house hold, and “maintaining the warm and loving relations within the family”.⁹³ This is justified both in force of the social order prescribed by the Qur'an and because of her biological dispositions as a woman: it is she who gives birth and she is considered to possess biological capabilities more fit to family life than the man. She is

⁹³ Interview with Fatima Saidi, (Algiers, January 2009).

feminine, sentimental, modest, and deeply committed to her family. Men have other dispositions and roles to fulfill – this way the genders complete each other.

The insistence on women's special role and responsibilities within the family involves a demand that she does not overstep her boundaries or compromise this role. All additional public activism is encouraged, but only as long as it can be harmoniously combined with domestic obligations and does not violate her natural dispositions as a woman. Her *feminine essence* must be preserved. In this way the family – though being the main provider of her worth and importance – also function as a natural limitation of her role.

The Family Code

The Algerian Family Code naturally constitute a central element in the MSP's gender discourse as Islamic family law is understood as an essential part of the solution to improve women's situation. The importance of the Family Code lies in that it protects the family, which is widely understood as being attacked from both external and domestic Western-orientated forces:

Especially with regards to what is happening in the West, we need to have guarantees. The Family Code guarantees for the preservation of the family as a basic unit.⁹⁴

Moreover, the MSP members wish to distance themselves from the West by recognizing and appreciating the differences and complementarity between the genders, rather than placing the two in a competitive relationship. According to the MSP, it is precisely the exaggerated focus on equality which has disequibrated the natural balance in Western societies and which is now threatening to dissolve the societies from within:

We do not wish to enter a situation where the relationship between the genders is one of competition of who dominates who.⁹⁵

The MSP members thus insist that Islamic family law protects and guarantee women's rights. The Algerian family Code is viewed as a condition for the true liberation of Algerian women -

⁹⁴ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene, (Algiers, January 2009).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

not in the Western sense but in a way that is faithful to her basic capacities and cultural specificities as an Algerian and Muslim woman. However, they also argue that the Code needs to be *amended and enriched* in order to better serve the needs of contemporary Algerian women. Yet, despite of the MSP's insistence of the importance of *ijtihad* also on the issue of women's position, they seem to be quite defensive with regards to the Family Code and unwilling to elaborate what eventual amendments could consist of. For instance, Nouredine Ait Messaoudene underscores that much of the controversy related to the topic of Islamic Family Code is due to misunderstandings and ignorance:

Concerning the question of women's rights, many confront us with *Sharia* and its rules for marriage, divorce and heritage. Especially the question of heritage comes up again and again. And the *Wali*. All of these issues are poorly understood.⁹⁶

Abdelkrim Dahman insists that the Code must be understood from within its own context. For instance, when we were discussing the *Wali* institution,⁹⁷ he said that it is important to note that the *Wali* does not only protect the family's interests but also those of the girl:

We think of the *Wali* as a protector, not as a tutor as in the French translation of the word [tuteur]. The *Wali* has no right to marry the girl to whom he likes. He can absolutely not impose his choice on the woman. *Sharia* offers many solutions to deal with an angry father who refuses to accept his daughter's choice of husband. She can choose her own *Wali*; an uncle; a judge. So *Sharia* is not so strict after all.⁹⁸

On the other hand, Abdelkrim Dahman does not want to take a position to whose rights are most important in case of colliding interests:

The *Wali* has no right to marry her as he likes. He does not have the right to make choices for her. However, on the other side: does she have the right to impose her choice on her family? This is what must be discussed.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ The *Wali* institution arguably constitutes the most controversial aspect of the Algerian Family Code, and has been at the center of the ongoing debates. The *Wali* is a mandatory institution that renders women legal minors by stipulating that they remain under a lifelong tutelage of a male guardian. The 2005 amendments of the Code did not lead to the abolishment of the *Wali* but made it possible for women to choose their own *Wali*.

⁹⁸ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahmen, (Algiers, January 2009).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

This ambiguous discourse is characteristic for the MSP discourse on women's role and rights within an Islamic framework. At the general level, there is a tendency to embrace concepts such as equality. Fatima Saidi, MSP's National secretary of women and family issues, says: "Islam guarantees men and women equal social and political rights". At the more specific level, however, the MSP appears to be more hesitant towards institutionalizing women's equal social rights, especially within the family. It is widely acknowledged that the priority of protecting the unity of the family allows for somewhat differential social rights. Abdelkrim Dahmen says: "In Islam there are no aprioris vis-à-vis women. Except maybe with regards to what you call the Family Code". As such, it is concerns about the family that are the most frequent arguments against women's equal social rights. An interesting point is that it does not seem that the MSP members perceive equal political rights but differential social rights to constitute a paradox; or that the individual woman's interests may potentially collide with those of the family.

***Ijtihad* - possibilities and limitations**

The MSP puts great emphasis on their positive attitude towards *ijtihad* - also regarding the issue of women's position - and underscores their difference from more radical Islamist parties who largely understand Islamic family law as an "untouchable" topic:

We understand the fear, not only of western people, but also that of Muslims, with regards to the fundamentalists, who have an irreconcilable vision of the *Sharia*. This is wrong. Islam is meant to liberate, not imprison, human reason. Islam gives human reason and rationalism a central place. Human reason has a constant task in interpreting the Qur'anic message and adapting it to the current circumstances. This distinguishes us from the fundamentalists: we are open to all contributions from human reason, *ijtihad*.¹⁰⁰

The MSP members state that certain elements of the current Family Code may be the result of a dominating patriarchal and discriminating interpretation of Islam and thus in need of reform. Yet, they do not want to go into more details than simply stating that they are open towards *ijtihad*:

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene, (Algiers, January 2009).

In Islam as in any other philosophy, religious or secular, you have canonical foundations, and then you have less “basic” elements that are left for the individual to interpret. These fundamental principles in Islam have been perceived differently by Islamists in the past – and the fashion of materializing, applying, living, and organizing these principles in society have also differed greatly ... As of now, what are the parts that are negotiable and what are non negotiable parts? I think there will always be some negotiable parts, which it is up to the society to decide what is best for. And there are intrinsic aspects of the religion which no one has touched until this day. As of now, many aspects seem fixed because no experiences have been made. Therefore, people say ‘it’s like that’. But will it continue to be like that if the experiences demand changes? This is where I would be very interested to see the development.¹⁰¹

The MSP explains that the reason for why they do not want go into details on this point is because the scope of legal reform of women’s position is something that has to be decided though a democratic national dialogue. In the end it is the Algerian people who has to decide *how far* a liberal development on this issue may go and in which speed eventual reforms should be introduced.

4.3 The rationale

“La femme algérienne”

Several researchers in the field of discourse analysis have pointed out that when trying to analyze political discourses, it is often useful to investigate what type of identity construction that lays at the foundation of the discourse. Some even argue that all political discourse is essentially about the construction of identities: in order to succeed with a specific policy proposition, politicians (or activists) need a convincing account of the identity in question, namely the individual for whom the policy is directed.¹⁰² I believe this insight may serve as a fruitful approach when trying to investigate the ideological rationale of the MSP with regards to their gender politics. In order to mobilize support for their gender politics, the MSP needs a compelling narrative of who the Algerian woman actually is – of her most authentic identity features as well as her wishes, potential, and capabilities. And this Algerian woman, *la femme Algérienne*, is indeed a present identity in the MSP gender discourse. In fact, in line with the

¹⁰¹ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahmen, (Algiers, January 2009).

¹⁰² Hansen, Lene, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 19.

generally strong identity focus in the MSP political discourse, it is strikingly often referred to *the Algerian woman* as if she constituted a real person. Therefore I argue that the “main” rationale of the MSP is an identity construction of the Algerian woman which incorporates and personifies the most important impulses and forces within the MSP’s cultural and political project, the simultaneous strive for *authenticity* and *progress*. The result is the construction of an Algerian woman of a quite complex nature.

Who is “the Algerian woman”?

The Algerian woman is arguably the main symbolic representatives of the *authentic Algerian national identity* that the MSP claims to represent and which constitutes a corner stone of their social and political project. As a representative for this identity, *the Algerian woman* takes clear distance from Western forms of gender relations and values in general:

The feminists try to speak in the name of the Algerian woman. But the Algerian woman is not liberal! She is modest and puts her family before anything.¹⁰³

The Algerian woman has in fact few resemblances with Western women: supposedly in contrast to Western women, *the Algerian woman* is family orientated, modest and hard working. She is proud of being a woman and does not want equality neither in roles or rights. Moreover, she draws historical and political legitimacy from her participation in the Algerian revolution:

The Algerian woman is strong and brave and has fought side by side with the men during the Revolution and beyond. She has earned her rights and is prepared to claim them.¹⁰⁴

This statement clearly expresses the ambiguity of this identity construction. On the one hand, *the Algerian woman* is proud of her feminine assets and wants complementarity rather than equal rights. On the other hand, it is evident that even though *equal rights* are not a goal, she considers her self to have certain rights. However, it remains a bit unclear exactly what kind of rights these are. As such, this citation points to the more modern and progressive features

¹⁰³ Interview with Fatima Saidi, (Algiers, January 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

of *the Algerian woman*. She is a combatant, brave and strong and increasingly assuming a more public role in society, and simultaneously respects traditional and *authentic* ideas about the gender's complementarity. She is interested and engaged in social and political affairs, and she is highly educated and holds a job outside the home. Still, she does not challenge dominating ideas about women's nature and would never risk pursuing personal ambitions at the cost of her domestic obligations:

We work for a more visible role from women in the Algerian society. But only as long as her essence is preserved. Women must not abandon their basic qualities; she is sentimental and feminine. And she must continue to be like this.¹⁰⁵

The Algerian woman is thus a construction with tensions. In fact, this identity construction seems to be an attempt to personalize the successful reconciliation between authenticity and modernity. As such, she seems to be carefully customized to the MSP gender politics, and visa versa. I do not argue that the coexistence of these different tensions necessarily constitute a contradiction and a paradox. Yet, I believe it is reasonable to argue that it results in an identity construction that is filled with tensions, and which is therefore productive, in the neutral sense of the word, rather than stable. Consequently, it is not unlikely that the tensions between these different components of *the Algerian woman* are likely to emerge to the surface should the circumstances encourage it.

Summing up

In this section I have tried to outline the main narrative of the MSP's gender discourse. As we have seen, the MSP is concerned about women's situation in contemporary Algeria and understands women's deteriorated status as a result of internal and external power struggles. The solution proposed is to restore the natural harmony between the genders by returning to the true Islamic principles and then adapt these to answer the needs of the contemporary context. The main tools to improve women's situation are thus the *Sharia* and *ijtihad*. The cultural rationale upon which the MSP draws to mobilize supporters for their gender politics

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Salima Aissou, General Secretary of the MSP National Council (Schlef, Algeria, January 2009).

is a quite politicized identity construction of *the Algerian woman*, who is the main representative for the “authentic Algerian identity” that the MSP claim to represent.

Interestingly, I have not been able to trace any considerable development or evolution with regards to the MSP’s gender ideology since the initiation of the movement until today. In fact, the ideological framework seems to be largely the same. Nahnah is still the authority on the matter and his 1995 party program continues to function as the only written manifest on the MSP position towards women’s position. This impression was supported by Abdelkrim Dahman:

At the ideological level, there have not been a lot of changes. But at the level of action, there are now more women with responsibilities. So most of the development has been the result of action and experiences. But at the level of ideas? I don’t think so. From the very start, the party has underscored its devotion to the women. At that time, it even chocked many other Islamists.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahmen, (Algiers, January 2009).

5 The strategic dimension

The strategic dimension refers to the *organizational* efforts of a social movement applied to recruit followers and pursue political goals.¹⁰⁷ In order to make an impact, social movements need organization first and foremost. As organizations, they can acquire and then deploy resources to achieve well-defined goals. It is thus the organizational structure and strategies of the MSP that will be the focus for the present chapter. For the purposes of the present study, I have interpreted the *strategic dimension* to refer to 1) the MSP's mobilizing mechanism to recruit female members, and 2) women's position internally in the movement. The main research question investigated here is thus: what organisational measures does the MSP take in order to *recruit* and *keep* their female members? This chapter is based on official statistics and documentation, and on interviews with MSP members, local academics and journalists.

5.1 Mobilizing mechanisms

Creating the "Woman Party"

Since its foundation as an Islamic welfare association in the early 1960s, it seems that women's issues have constituted a central dimension of the MSP's social and political activism. Nahnah early declared that the question of women's position was an area of particular importance to him and situated the party among the more liberal fractions in Algerian politics with regards to this issue by advocating in favour of a more proactive and participatory role for Algerian women.¹⁰⁸ Through its ambition to integrate women in the social, political and professional spheres, while simultaneously respecting traditional ideas about the genders' complimentary roles, the MSP became one of the first parties in Algeria to create a platform for female activism and participation outside the home. The party's investment and focus on women's issues turned out to be a remarkably successful strategy in a context where women in general had few forums for social and political engagement. As a result, women have since the beginning constituted a vital part of the MSP activist base (and

¹⁰⁷ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *Islamic Activism - A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 9 - 13.

¹⁰⁸ In connection with the 6th anniversary of the decease of Mahfoud Nahnah September 18th 2009, the MSP organised a conference entitled "Citizenship and women's political rights" to honour Nahnah's dedication to women's causes. Source: "El Moujahid", article available at: URL <http://www.elmoudjahid.com/accueil/Nation/37215.html>, accessed October 20th 2009.

later on, electoral base), and the party has traditionally had one of the most potent “women’s sections” of the country.¹⁰⁹ Though no official statistics on the level of female representation within the different political parties exists,¹¹⁰ it is generally acknowledged that the MSP is the political party in Algeria with the largest female activist base. Due to their focus on women’s issues in a time when this generally was a neglected topic, the MSP seems to enjoy a sort of historical legitimacy as a party concerned with women’s issues. As a result, interestingly, the party enjoys a widespread and good reputation for their efforts to improve women’s condition, even in certain non-Islamist circles.

Enlargement of the traditional gender roles: « Une femme au rôle plus effectif »¹¹¹

The main “narrative” of the MSP’s gender discourse is that Algerian women have been sacrificed during the political turmoil that have marked Algerian history and that she is in need of social and political rehabilitation. Arguably the most remarkable element in Nahnah’s woman discourse was his condemnation of the confinement of women to the domestic sphere, which he meant was a very negative and widespread feature within the Algerian society. He therefore insisted that women’s participation at all societal levels, including the high political structures, were indispensable for “the healthy development of the Algerian nation”.¹¹² By actively encouraging women’s labour and education, Nahnah clearly distanced himself not only from most Islamist leaders on this issue, but also from other conservative political leaders. The discrepancy between Nahnah and other Islamist leaders, like FIS’ Ali Belhadj, is evident when we compare the following citations:

The woman has left the home and abandoned the educating of the children, she has competed with the man in professional life, and all other domains, she has denied to be entertained by him and has liberated herself from all of her feminine characteristics. The homes resemble

¹⁰⁹ Boubekeur, Amel, “Les partis Islamistes algériens et la démocratie: vers une professionnalisation politique?”, in *L’année du Maghreb*, Édition 2008, CNRS Éditions (Paris 2008), 221.

¹¹⁰ UN-INSTRAW report “Strengthening women’s leadership and participation in politics and decision-making process in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Mapping of the situation.”, available at:

<http://www.algeria.com/forums/womens-corner/19484-women-under-represented-algerian-politics.html> (Accessed 11.20.2009).

¹¹¹ From Nahnah’s “Le Programme Alternatif”.

¹¹² Nahnah, Mahfoud, “Le Programme Alternatif”, 42.

deserts or old ruins, the children have become orphanages, virtues like modesty and chastity no longer exist. Society is trembling and everything fall apart.¹¹³

The Algerian woman takes up a special place in my program as I believe that she should not have to envy the man in anything. Today more than ever, the woman deserves that we provide her with the means to spread out her wings and participate in the struggle to end the Algerian crisis and to build a strong state, a solidly united society, and a happy family. With the aim of socially and politically rehabilitate the Algerian woman, I propose the following measures: [...]¹¹⁴

Also during the interviews conducted for this research, the MSP members were very eager to underscore the party's particular initiative with regards to women's position, as well as the participation of MSP women:

For us it is important to not only have a discourse on the position of women, we make women participate. True enough, 95 percent of the women within the MSP wear *hijab*, but they are active women! During the MSP meetings, there are always a lot of women. So this is not only a matter of discourse. Even with their hijab, the MSP women are very present.¹¹⁵

It seems that the MSP's rhetorical focus on women's issues and advocacy for an enlargement of the traditional women's role has been an effective strategy for attracting female supporters. Moreover, in order to effectively mobilize and recruit female activists, the MSP has followed up their liberal gender discourse with practical facilitation and political work to enhance women's increased public participation: the movement has led large campaigns to encourage women to take an education and to take a job outside the home; they have emphasized grassroots activities such as teaching women income-generating skills; they have organised literacy classes for adult women and religious education focusing on men and women's equality in Islam;¹¹⁶ finally, they have engaged in comprehensive social welfare projects directed specifically at women aiming at providing health care, poverty help, food, housing, counselling and schooling.

¹¹³ FIS leader Ali Belhadj, quoted in Al-Ahnaf, Botiveau and Fregosi's *L'Algérie par ses islamistes*, (Paris: Karthala, 1991), 245 (my translation).

¹¹⁴ Nahnah, "Le Programme Alternatif", 42 (my translation).

¹¹⁵ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene (Algiers, January 2009).

¹¹⁶ Gray, Doris, "Women in Algeria Today and the Debate over Family Law", 17.

At the political level, the MSP's acclaimed goals to improve women's participation have been: to actively promote women into the high structures of the state; amendments and enrichments of the Family Code to better protect the woman; fight domestic violence; and to reduce women's working hours to make it easier to combine professional and domestic obligations.¹¹⁷ When the MSP first entered the parliament in 1997, Nahnah proposed a woman for the position of Vice President, and until today, this MSP woman is the only woman to have occupied the function of Vice President at the National Assembly. This received considerable attention and further strengthened the MSP's position as the "Woman Party".

The overall impression is thus that the MSP's main mobilizing strategy to recruit female members has been to take a voluntaristic and practical approach to women's issues, in which the main ethos has been that women should be able to play a more public role. Legal reform (traditionally the major element in the secular feminist's approach to women's issues) has been understood as less important. This practical approach has turned out to be a success and has placed the MSP in a rather unique position. As historian and sociologist Daho Djerbal puts it: "As of today, the MSP is the only political party that is able to mobilise women to vote in a situation where the abstention rate is outrageous."¹¹⁸ Moreover, Daho Djerbal states that the MSP has played an instrumental role in the transformation of the traditional gender structures of the country:

The MSP visited people in their homes and told the girls to not to stay at home but to go out and learn a profession. The girls learned a profession, took a job outside the home - they left the family milieu and took home a salary. This is the beginning of a major change in the structures of the Algerian society.¹¹⁹

Daho also draws attention to another interesting area of investment of the MSP, namely educating women in Islamic law. According to Daho, the MSP has laid pressure on the Islamic law schools to educate more women in Islamic law. As referred to in the background chapter, in Algeria today, women actually constitute more than 70 percent of the countries lawyers and 60 percent of its judges. But, so far, only a very low number of women have been educated in Islamic law. Therefore, the emergence of women educated in both secular and

¹¹⁷ Nahnah, "Le Programme Alternatif", 42 - 43.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Daho Djerbal (Algiers, January 2009).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Islamic law marks a promising development. Women educated in both realms of law are a relatively new phenomenon in the Arab world and one likely to increasingly strengthen women's influence on processes at the heart of the Islamist movement(s).

Also Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche, Professor in political sciences at the University of Algiers, agrees that the MSP is the political party that has shown most voluntarism and initiative with regards to women's issues.¹²⁰ Dris-Aït-Hamadouche says that the MSP discourse is remarkably undogmatic and makes an effort to appeal to the changing structures of the Algerian society in which women are increasingly present at all levels. She adds that the MSP is careful to adjust their rhetoric to their audience and that they therefore have been remarkably successful in recruiting women both among the underprivileged layers of the population, as well as among female students and professional women.

To conclude, it seems that women have been a central area of investment for the MSP since the beginning. On the basis of three observations, it is here argued that the main mobilizing *strategy* of the MSP in order to recruit female activists has been to establish itself as the "Woman Party" – a relatively liberal party with a particular focus on women's issues. More specifically, at the level of mobilizing *mechanisms*, the MSP has been successful in recruiting women from all societal levels by being undogmatic and by adapting their discourse to their audiences. By investing in underprivileged women and providing health care, poverty help, housing, and schooling, the MSP has efficiently filled up the vacuums created by state policies and constructed a solid recruiting foundation among these women. At the same time, their focus on education, professionalism, and the inclusion of women in the high political structures, has appealed to the upcoming, more privileged generations of young Algerian women.

Judging from their popularity among all types of female audiences, it seems that the MSP's practical approach to women's situation has been a more successful means of recruitment than the secular feminist movements focus on legal issues and citizenship.

5.2 Women's position internally in the movement

I have tried to assess women's position internally in the movement by 1) looking at available statistics on the number of women in central positions and 2) by interviewing a number of MSP members, male and female, about their views and experiences with regards to this issue.

¹²⁰ Interview with Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche (Algiers, January 2009).

Statistics on the level of female political representation in Algerian politics

Initially, the documentation that I was looking for was: the percentage of female activists within the different main political parties; the number of women in central positions within the MSP and the other main political parties; the number of female representatives of the different political parties in the Algerian parliament; and the number of female candidates on the electoral lists presented by the different parties during the last elections. The idea was that this information could serve as a foundation to compare the level of female political representation within the MSP relatively to that of the other main political parties.

However, it was not possible to collect the material for this comparison as none of the political parties have been willing to provide any statistics. Moreover, the Algerian government apparently has very little available information. Additionally, I have done extensive searches on the internet, contacted a large number of political institutions, researchers and NGO's, but none of these sources have been able to help me with my inquiries about these statistics.¹²¹ As a project assistant at the office of The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW) replied: "As you have surly noticed, it is extremely difficult to find the statistics you are asking for".¹²² He then wished me good luck and asked me to inform him if I found anything of interest. This was basically the same answer I got from the other researchers and NGO's. As a result, the documentation upon which I attempt to assess the level of female representation within the MSP compared to the other political parties is very incomplete. Nevertheless, I will present the information I did find.

As for female representation in the Algerian parliament structures, the National Assembly's website has some statistic for the last periods.¹²³ With regards to the percentage of women on the election lists, the UN-INSTRW report entitled "Strengthening women's leadership and participation in politics and decision-making process in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Mapping of the situation" reveals some pieces of information. As for women's level of political representation within the MSP, this was very difficult as the PR responsible of the

¹²¹ I have been in contact with: the administrative offices and public relations for the MSP, FLN and RND; the Algerian government and specifically the Ministry of Domestic Politics; Algeria Watch; the United Nations Development Program (UNDP); the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW); the International Crises Room (ICG); Centre de Recherche en Economie Appliquée pour le Développement (CREAD); Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML); and researchers Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche (University of Algiers), Daho Djerbal (University of Algiers), Zoubir Arous (CREAD), Isabelle Werenfels (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP), Amel Boubekeur (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) and Naima Mouhleb (Peace Research Institute Oslo).

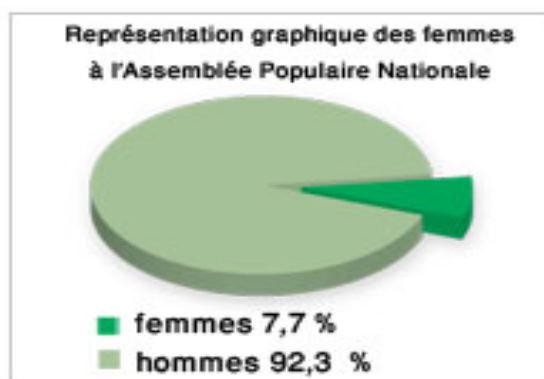
¹²² Email correspondence of September 28, 2009.

¹²³ <http://www.apn-dz.org/apn/french/index.htm>.

party, in the end and despite of repeated promises, refused to give me any documentation or numbers. The table with numbers on women in central positions internally in the MSP is therefore based upon information provided during the interviews.

5.2.1 Female representation in the National Assembly

Figure 1. Female representation in the National Assembly 2007 - 2012



In the present period (2007 - 2012) women constitute 7, 7 % of the members of parliament. This equals 30 women. These women belong to:

Figure 2. Female representation according to party affiliation 2007 - 2012

Female representation 2007 – 2012	
Front national de la libération (FLN)	11
Rassemblement nationale et démocratique (RND)	1
Parti des travailleurs (PT)	11
Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie (RCD)	1
Mouvement pour la jeunesse et la démocratie (MJD)	1
Mouvement pour l’entente nationale (MEN)	1
Mouvement El-Infitah	1
Front national des independants pour la concorde (FNIC)	1
Mouvement nationale d’esperance (MNE)	1
Independant candidates	1
Total	30

As for the period 1997 - 2002, the distribution is as listed below.

Figure 3. Female representation according to party affiliation 1997 - 2002

Female representation 1997 – 2002	
Rassemblement nationale et démocratique (RND)	9
Mouvement de la société pour la Paix (MSP)	2
Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie (RCD):	1
Front des forces sociales (FFS)	2
Parti des travailleurs (PT)	1
Total	15

(Source: the Algerian National Assembly's official website, <http://www.apn-dz.org/apn/french/index.htm>)

Percentage of women candidates on the electoral lists:

Figure 4. Female representation on the electoral lists, 2002 and 2007

Party	Elections	Percentage of women
FLN	2002 legislative elections	2,56 %
RND	2002 legislative elections	1,09 %
MSP	2007 legislative elections	20 % ¹²⁴

(Source: the UN-INSTRAW report “Strengthening women’s leadership and participation in politics and decision-making process in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Mapping of the situation.”)

5.2.2 Female representation within the MSP

Estimated number of female activists: over 40 percent

Estimated number of women in the high structures of the party: around 40 people

¹²⁴ The reliability of this number is discussed on page 62.

Figure 5. Women in central positions internally in the MSP

MSP PARTY STRUCTURE		
THE NATIONAL LEVEL	THE WILAYA LEVEL	THE COMMUNAL LEVEL
The National Council: 2 women (out of 15)	Possibly some female vice-presidents of the Wilayas	No female heads of section
The National Office: 2 women (the General Secretary of the National Office and the National Secretary of Women's and Family issues)		
The commissions of the National Office's members: An unknown number of women		

5.3 A “Woman party” consisting of men?

On the basis of the above information, what can be said about the level of female representation within the MSP? The information is evidently highly incomplete. Moreover, the estimated numbers of women in central positions within the MSP has not been confirmed, nor have I found the corresponding numbers for the other political parties. This naturally makes it difficult to interpret these numbers in meaningful way. Still, the above material makes it possible to make some general assumptions.

As we can see, the number of women representing the MSP in the National Assembly is zero and seriously questions whether their nickname the “Woman Party” is appropriate. During the last two periods, the MSP has not had one single female representative in the National Assembly, in fact, the only time the MSP has had female representatives in Parliament was during their first period, 1997-2002, when they had two female of a total of 69 representatives. This is all the more surprising as the party is the third largest political party in Parliament and currently possess 51 out of 389 seats. The other political parties in the Presidential Alliance, the FLN and the RND, had respectively 13 and 1 female candidate(s) in the current period. There is no available information for the previous period (2002-2007), but if we compare these numbers with those of the 1997-2002 period, a considerable development can be traced. Overall, the total percentage of female representative in the parliament has

doubled since the 1997-2002 period (the number has increased from 15 to 30 women). Moreover, we can see that a quite radical redistribution has taken place with regards to which parties present more female representatives. The FLN, for example, has gone from “worst” to “best”: whereas the previous state party in 1997-2002 did not have one single female representative among its 158 parliamentarians, in the current they have 11 female representatives (of a total number of 136 representatives), hence taking the lead together with the Worker’s Party. The RND, on the other hand, has experienced an opposite development: from being the political party with the absolutely highest level of female representatives in the 1997-2002 period (9 of 156 representatives), the party is now one of those with the smallest level of female representation with only one female representative (out of 62). Still, the MSP holds the lowest comparative score with none female representatives.

The absence of female MSP representatives in the National Assembly is all the harder to explain when we look at the percentage of female candidates the party claim to have represented at their electoral lists (see figure 4). Curiously, the MSP is reported to be the most progressive party in Parliament in reference to the use of quotas to enhance the level of female representation. While the FLN and the RND are explicitly against the use of quotas, the MSP announced before the 2007 legislative elections, that they are integrating women by twenty percent on their election lists.¹²⁵ Yet, none were elected. As I see it, the absence of MSP women in the Parliament severely challenges the veracity of party’s stated use of quotas. This was also supported by Fatima Saidi: “There are no quotas.”¹²⁶ If twenty percent of the candidates on election lists were women, it is difficult to understand how none of them could have been elected – particularly when we consider that women constitute a significant part of the MSP’s electoral base and that one of the flagships of the MSP has been to integrate women in the high structures of the state. Moreover, as Nouredinne Ait Messaoudene told me during the interview, women’s poor representation on the election lists has been the subject of serious controversy internally in the party. Both during the 2002 and 2007 elections, a considerable number of MSP female candidates actually boycotted the elections because they were unhappy with their representation on the election lists. This may indicate that either they represented far less than twenty percent, or they were placed at the bottom of the list. As it has not been possible to get a copy of the election lists, I have not had the chance to investigate this more thoroughly.

¹²⁵ UN-INSTRAW report, “Strengthening women’s leadership and participation in politics and decision-making process in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Mapping of the situation.”, 19.

¹²⁶ Interview with Fatima Saidi (Algiers, January 2009).

As for the level of female political representation *internally* in the party, this seems to be considerably stronger. Yet, it is interesting to look at these numbers together with central party members' interpretations of the low number of MSP women in central positions, both internally and in the state structure. For instance, when I talked with Abdelkrim Dahman about the female representation internally within the MSP, Dahman explained (as figure 5 shows) that one of the main problems the party faced in terms of female representation was to get women elected in the local councils. At the national level, however, he said that it was much easier to get women elected:

In our country, there are many regions where there is unthinkable to choose a woman. Therefore, it is also the position of women in society that fire backs at us. There is a will to move forward. But because we are democratic, because we leave it to the local councils to decide, the local considerations get the upper hand. Until today we have never had a female president at a regional assembly. No vice presidents as far as I know, not even a commission president. Maybe in one of the big cities.¹²⁷

However, in light of the absence of MSP women in Parliament, how is this statement defensible? When I asked Dahman to elaborate on this point, he said that:

As for political representation, it is true that since the first mandate of 1997 - 2002 when the MSP had two female deputies at the National Assembly, we have not had any functioning female parliamentarian. Paradoxically, MSP women have more luck in the regional and local representation where their numbers are continuously increasing though they remain well below that of the men.¹²⁸

The two statements seem to be completely contradictory, and strengthen the impression that the poor level of female representation within the MSP - both at the national and local levels - represents a somewhat embarrassing point for the Woman Party.

¹²⁷ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahman (Algiers, January 2009).

¹²⁸ Ibid.

5.4 Women's position according to the members

How is it that we win because of the women – but when it comes to promoting them as leaders, we are not willing to make an effort? ¹²⁹

Both the male and female interviewees explained that the major problem with regards to women's position internally in the MSP is their poor level of political representation and influence. Despite the movement's rhetorical focus on integrating women in central decision making organs, there continues to be a wide discrepancy between ideals and reality on this issue: "With regards to women's level of political representation there is still a gross inconsistency between reality and representation."¹³⁰

According to Nouredinne Ait Messaoudene, "this is an important political topic which returns again and again, especially during the electoral campaigns when women are angry about not being sufficiently represented on the lists."¹³¹ The near absence of women in central positions is explained with both ideological hindrances and structural hindrances.

According to the MSP members, the movement faces considerable ideological obstacles in their efforts to recruit women to leader positions, most notably in the form of a general widespread conservatism with regards to women's position that is especially dominant in the rural areas. Conservative local councils and conservative husbands are thus frequent hindrances. As we have seen, Abdelkrim Dahman connects the absence of women in central positions to the organisational structure of the party as the lists of candidates are not decided on a national level, but on local councils level. The local councils, afraid of losing votes, tend to primarily take into consideration the opinions of the local citizens, who often resent the idea of female candidates. Another frequent obstacle to get women to accept taking on leader responsibilities is conservative husbands:

This is another side of the problem. Why can't a woman be the vice president of the Wilaya Council? The woman doesn't want to. Or her husband doesn't want to. "I do not want my wife to be together with men in meetings until eight o'clock in the evening. Sometimes they say

¹²⁹Interview with Abdelkrim Dahman in Algiers 2009. He was referring to the MSP women's massive mobilization during the 2004 Presidential elections, widely recognised as decisive for Bouteflika's successful re-election.

¹³⁰ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene (Algiers, January 2009).

¹³¹ Ibid.

inappropriate things, sometimes they are not properly respectful towards the women”, etc. They do not want their wife to find her self in an intimidating situation because she is a vice president.¹³²

Abdelkrim Dahman is careful to underscore that this traditionalist, but normal, kind of behaviour is not typical for the Islamists. In fact, he argues that it is rather the contrary: the Islamists are often more voluntaristic. This assertion was supported by several of the female interviewees who were eager to communicate that the MSP men are in fact quite liberal compared to those of the other political parties. There is focus internally in the movement on changing the attitudes towards these issues. Women in the party are encouraged to take a higher education, to take a job outside the home, and to engage in politics. And the men are encouraged to support their wives in this. Though there are no available statistics, these attitudes seem to quite well reflected in the socio-economic situation of the female members. Indeed, most of those I had the chance to meet had very solid education, being lawyers, doctors and university professors, and had paid jobs outside the home. This aspect was also commented upon by Daho Djerbal, Doris Gray and Louisa Dris-Ait-Hamadouche during our conversations.¹³³

The other main obstacle to women’s participation and political influence (both internally in the MSP and in Algerian politics in general), which received a particular focus during the interviews with the female interviewees, were the structural ones such as a poorly developed transportation system, long working hours, security issues and a lacking in kindergartens:

Women’s right to participation needs to be accommodated. This lack of accommodation is what we consider to be the largest obstacle for women in contemporary Algeria. The difficult situation for many Algerian women is to a large extent a consequence of a lack of basic practicalities such as security, transportation, kindergartens, and so on. Without these basic structures, there is no way women can be active. This is MSP’s main priorities when it comes to improving the situation for women.¹³⁴

¹³² Interview with Abdelkrim Dahmen (Algiers, January 2009).

¹³³ Interviews with Djerbal and Hamadouche (Algiers, January 2009) and with Gray (Washington, October 2008).

¹³⁴ Interview with Salima Aissou (Schlef, Algeria, January 2009).

5.5 Solutions proposed

In order to enhance the level of female political representation, the MSP claims to have taken two main measures: integrating the women's section into the main organizational corpus of the party and opening up for the use of quotas.

No more “Women's section”?

A common way of structuring a political party or social movement, both in Algeria and in the Arab world in general (and also to a certain extent globally), has been to have a separate women's section. However, this organizational separation between the women and the main organizational corpus has frequently been accused of hindering women's level of political influence. For instance, a recent study on women's position internally in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood - the MSP's mother party - reveals that the “Sisters”, the female members of the party, consider the party's traditional organizational structure to be *the* major obstacle to their real political influence. This is because this organizational separation prohibits direct exchange between the two bodies and effectively blocks the women's influence on central decision-making processes.¹³⁵ Considering this, the MSP's decision to integrate the women's section into the main organizational corpus seems to represent a promising development. According to Nouredinne Ait Messaoudene, the MSP had a separate women's section until 1996, when it was decided to abandon this model and integrate the two, precisely in the purpose of preventing women's political marginalisation. Still, there is some uncertainty connected to the actual practices within the movement:

At the organic level, there is no longer a separation. There is no longer a male and a female association, but one single organisation. This has been the case since 1996.¹³⁶

There still is a women's section. We almost have a hybrid system. We try to conciliate the two. Algerians are sometimes very conservative – sometimes the women themselves demand

¹³⁵ Abdel-Latif, Omayma, “In the Shadow of the Brothers - The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood”, Carnegie Paper, October 2008, available at: URL <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22347>, (Accessed 08.03 2009), 10.

¹³⁶ Interview with Nouredinne Ait Messaoudene (Algiers, January 2009).

to have a separate section. Therefore, there exists such a section – but at the same time, all structures are open to women.¹³⁷

Towards the use of quotas?

As we have seen, the MSP claims to be the most progressive party in Parliament with regards to the use of quotas, by integrating women at the election lists by 20 percent. Though the absence of MSP women in Parliament completely challenges this statement (as do contradictory statements on the part of central party members with regards to the attitudes towards, and practices with regards to, the use of quotas internally in the MSP) there are some indications that the party is increasingly embracing the system of quotas. For example, while Fatima Saidi denied that quotas are currently being used within the MSP, she expressed that the MSP women were clearly supporting this measure: “We are obviously in favour of this. This will encourage us even more, and help to improve female representation in the high structures.”¹³⁸ Also among some of the men, like Abdelkrim Dahman, there were signs of a more positive attitude towards the use of quotas, though expressed more hesitantly:

If we were to have a system of parity [...] For example equal representation at the Parliament ... I don't think this would be difficult. But if you try to impose equal representation in the local councils, I think it would be very difficult for many women to accept this kind of candidature. Again, this is not a typical for the MSP, but a common issue within all the political parties in Algeria. But I think that the voluntaristic aspect and maybe also the demand of equal representation, could contribute to change the habits in this country.¹³⁹

The MSP member responsible for public relations, Mohamed Zindinne Tebbal, informed that MSP President Aboujerra Soltani has recently proposed that 25 percent of the seats in Parliament be reserved for women.¹⁴⁰

Summing up

In this chapter I have tried to map both the MSP's mobilizing strategies and tactics for recruiting female members as well as assessing women's position internally in the party. The

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Interview with Fatima Saidi (Algiers, January 2009).

¹³⁹ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahmen (Algiers 2009).

¹⁴⁰ E-mail correspondence of September 24th 2009.

general impression is that the MSP has sought to appeal female supporters by establishing itself as the “Woman party”, a party with relatively liberal and modern views on women’s appropriate role, as well as by mainly addressing the practical concerns of Algerian women. Despite this sympathetic approach and focus on the need to integrate women in the high political structures, the party seems to have failed massively in the practical implementation of these same goals. As a result, women remain near to absent in MSP’s central decision making organs.

6 The structural dimension

Social movements do not operate in a vacuum, but belong to a broader social milieu and context. Collective actors are therefore both limited and empowered by exogenous and endogenous factors which may impact on their movement viability and menu of options.¹⁴¹ A rather broad category, *structures* might refer to both material and ideological sizes.

Investigating the structural environment in which the MSP operates, as well as how the different structural factors affect the movement viability of the party, is therefore useful as it contextualizes the study and contributes to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the movement's choice of tactics and evolution.

The questions that will be addressed in the present chapter are therefore: *which* are the major structural factors that affect the MSP's movement viability with regards to their gender politics, and *how* do these external factors and concomitant structures of opportunity and constraints affect the MSP's choice of actions? In order to answer these questions we need to analyse the political environment in which the MSP operates. For this purpose, I have relied on a broad selection of secondary sources such as historical works and political analysis, as well as interviews with local academics, journalists and activists with broad knowledge to the Algerian political situation and the MSP.

6.1 The international community

The international community¹⁴² undoubtedly represents a relevant level of analysis as it is a dimension the MSP, as an Islamist party in a former French colony, continuously has had to relate to and one that is likely to have exercised a considerable influence on its choice of tactics. International actors' influence on Algerian politics can be analyzed according to their role in three key events in Algerian history: colonialism; the civil crises of the 1990s, and more recently, the international "War on terror".

The French presence in Algeria left solid marks on Algerian society, possibly most notably in terms of durable dividing lines between the pro-Western, secularist tendencies and

¹⁴¹ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *Islamic Activism - A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 13 - 15.

¹⁴² Aware of the vagueness of this term, I am using it simply to refer to governments or groups of governments with considerable influential power on the geographical and political environment in which Algeria takes part such as Algeria's neighbouring countries, France and the US, as well as the EU and the UN.

the traditionalist currents. After independence, these dividing lines were reinforced through internal power struggles over Algeria's future. However, it is often very difficult to do a clear cut separation between the secularist and traditionalist tendencies as they are both entangled in the same historical processes. Moreover, the confusion with regards to what are *authentic* or *imposed* practices or where to draw the line between culture and religion makes this even more complicated. This confusion is especially visible in the Algerian legal system. The Human Development Report, published by the United Nations Development Program (2004) states:

The colonial imprint can be marked. Indeed, it is often difficult to determine which legal processes are genuinely traditional and which can be seen as a hybrid by-product of colonial manipulation and control. An added complication in separating authentic from imposed practices is that colonial rule and its "civilizing mission" unilaterally claimed responsibility for introducing modern values, beliefs and institutions to the colonies.¹⁴³

The colonial heritage thus continues to play a central role in Algerian politics, and an added unfortunate outcome is that the colonial rule and their protégées unilaterally came to claim monopoly as representatives for "modernity".

All subsequent influence of international actors on Algerian politics has naturally been of a more *indirect* nature than that of the colonial rule. Yet, judging from their role in events such as the interruption of the election process in 1991, it seems that their main influence has consisted of 1) support for the secular regime in power and 2) a strong scepticism towards Islamist movements.

During the 1991 elections and subsequent civil conflict, it became clear that the international community supported the secular regime, to the extent that they accepted the use of military means to prevent the sovereign winner of the 1991 elections – the FIS – to reap the fruits of its electoral victory and take office. The FIS victory represented a true democratic dilemma to the international community. The international community has traditionally strongly advocated democratic means. Yet, when an Islamist party – with uncertain and somewhat suspicious attitudes with regards to the legitimacy of democracy as ruling principle – won the elections, a majority of the international actors made an exception from the rule and

¹⁴³ The Human Development Report, published by the United Nations Development Program (2004), 58, quoted in Doris Gray's "Women in Algeria Today and the Debate over Family Law".

supported the army's decision to intervene on the basis that the country was not "ripe" for democracy. The majority of the other Algerian political parties, on the other hand, disagreed with the decision to abandon the elections, as they feared it would jeopardize the entire democratic transition.¹⁴⁴ In general, the army's intervention evoked very few protests from the international community. The new Algerian rulers quickly received the support of neighbouring Arab countries like Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Western democracies generally remained very cautious and subdued. France and the US declared themselves somewhat "preoccupied" and "worried" by the situation in Algeria, but no official position and no action was taken in favour, or against, the new regime.¹⁴⁵ To many Algerians, this silence of the Western democracies indicated implicit acceptance of the military intervention towards their democratic transition and has thus become a powerful symbol of the "double morality" of the West's democratization agenda (together with the Hamas victory of 2006). Volpi writes:

That Western democracies should remain passive while a democratically elected Islamist party is unceremoniously dismissed by the Algerian military is but one indication that Western powers collude with the autocratic forces of the Muslim world to deny Muslim citizens their rights.¹⁴⁶

More recently, the US-launched international "War on Terror" has put Algeria, or Algeria's ruling elite, in a much closer relationship with Western and international power holders than previously was the case. As one of the first countries to denounce the September 11 attacks and to officially join the international "War on Terror", Algeria has clearly shown its ambitions to improve its relations with the international community.

On the basis of these observations, I argue that international actors continue to exercise a considerable influence on Algerian politics, and that Algerian power holders, in an increasingly globalized world, view it as important to "stay on the side of" the international community. The sitting regime undoubtedly has an advantage in that they represent a more politically correct form of government (from a Western point of view) than that of the main political opposition, the Islamists. How, then, is it reasonable to assume that these international political structures impact on the MSP's movement viability and/or choice of tactics and strategies with regards to their gender politics?

¹⁴⁴ Volpi, Frédéric, *Islam and Democracy - The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria*, 56.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 16.

I contend that these existing structures provide the MSP with a powerful double incentive; to cooperate with the sitting regime while simultaneously challenging its monopoly on international support. The increasingly close ties between the Algerian government and the international community likely encourage the MSP to cooperate with the domestic regime in order to avoid the destiny of the FIS. Simultaneously, by improving their relations with international actors, the MSP hopes to increase their ability to lay pressure on the sitting regime.

This seems to be largely consistent with the MSP's apparent strategies. The party is clearly concerned with establishing good relations with international actors. In fact, the MSP is arguably *the* political party in Algeria which is the most internationally orientated: many of its members are active in international democracy and human rights networks, and it seems that the party has recognized (certain) Western partners to be vital in their efforts to pressure the sitting regime towards a genuine process of democratic transition. Self proclaimed admirers of certain aspects of Western politics, for example ideas of transparency and democracy, they are eager to underscore the resemblances between themselves and groups such as the Christian Democrats, and that the party is open for dialogue with nearly everyone.

The general impression is that the MSP's efforts to improve their relations with international power holders have pushed them in a more liberal direction. In order to counterwork all the accusations that has previously been used to legitimize their political exclusion as an Islamist party, the MSP is very concerned to mark their difference from radical Islamists and to show that they do not project backward values that are incompatible with modern, internationally recognized norms such as democracy, human rights and gender equality. Rather, democracy and human rights have since the initiation been one of their main topics of the MSP, and the party engaged in comprehensive educational and informational efforts to teach that Islam is not incompatible, but actually imposes, these values. Another more discrete agenda of their work has been to show that the incumbent secular government is not necessarily more democratic or tolerant. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the incentive of being recognized at the international level constitutes a substantial push factor in a liberal direction for the MSP.

The question of women's issues naturally assumes a central role in this connection. Women's position has traditionally been one of the main bones of contention between the Islamists and Western-orientated forces, and one of the trump cards of the international environment as well as of the secular government in place to discredit the Islamists.

Therefore, it is of particular importance of the MSP to show that they are not misogynists. It is here understood that what the MSP cannot deliver in terms of a completely egalitarian discourse on women's rights, they try to make up for by establishing it self as a party particularly concerned with women's issues. Becoming the political party in Algeria with the largest female activist base has provided an effective shelter against accusations of gender discriminating views. As such, the MSP strong and visible female presence has functioned as a *Carte Blanche* both in domestic and international politics.

6.2 The domestic political scene

In this section the focus will be on three groups that can be considered as major actors in Algerian gender politics, and that are therefore likely to affect the MSP's movement viability on this issue. The three groups are the secular feminist movement, the FLN, and the conservative Islamist electorate.

6.2.1 The secular feminist movement

What type of gender politics does the secularist feminist movement represent and how is it likely to impact that of the MSP? It is often referred to that Algeria has a particularly powerful secular feminist movement, maybe even one of the most powerful feminist movements in the Arab world. However, it is here argued that the secular feminists' importance is more symbolic than real and that their level of actual influence remains quite weak. As a result, they have not been able to exercise any considerable influence or pressure on the MSP.

Especially during the last decades, it seems that the secular feminist movements' scope and influence have been substantially reduced. Researchers have suggested several reasons for this. For example, Doris Gray points to the traumatic experiences of the civil conflict of the 90's where many women were directly targeted by radical Islamist for wearing western clothing, or for leading Western or "un-Islamic" life styles.¹⁴⁷ According to Gray, this has severely traumatized the young generations of Algerian women, to the point that few engage in collective struggles for women's rights. Another point which is referred to is that the secular feminist movement in Algeria to a large extent has remained an elite phenomenon

¹⁴⁷ Doris Gray, "Women in Algeria Today and the Debate over Family Law".

among privileged women. As their main focus has been on legal reform (abolition or substantial reform of the Family Code), they have not been able to reach a larger audience of Algerian women for whom basic daily concerns such as health, water, security and education have been more important (this also helps to explain the popularity of Islamist movements among these segments, with their traditional focus on social welfare and day-to-day concerns). As a result, it is argued, the strength and influence of secular feminist movements seems to have been drastically reduced. However, there are reasons to ask whether the secular feminist movements have in fact ever exercised any substantial influence on Algerian politics.

First, the political context in which they have tried to operate has never been ideal. As all kinds of political associations outside the framework of the FLN were prohibited until the political opening of 1989, feminist circles have had to operate clandestinely until this point, something which naturally reduced their ability to influence. In the early 1980s a number of new women's groups emerged, including the *Association des femmes pour l'égalité et l'exercice de la citoyenneté*, AFEPEC (Women's association for equality and the exercise in citizenship), *Association pour l'Emancipation des femmes*, AEF (Association for the Emancipation of Women) and *Association pour la défense et promotion des femmes*, ADPDF (Association for the defense and promotion of women).¹⁴⁸ However, the number of women actively participating in such movements remained limited as fear of government retaliation and public scorn kept many women away. As a result, the only legal women's movement before the political opening was the FLN institution *Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes*, UNFA, (the National union of Algerian women) founded in 1962. However, the UNFA has been widely criticized of being more effective in legitimizing the FLN's weak gender politics than of making any substantial reforms of women's position. This became particularly visible during the 1990s when a large number of central UNFA leaders were forced to leave because they refused to support the government's decision to adopt the 1984 Family Code, something which led to a massive condemnation of the UNFA from the other feminist associations.¹⁴⁹

An authoritarian political environment and continuous threats from radical Islamists have thus made Algeria a difficult place to work for many Algerian secular feminists. This explains why many of them, such as Marieme Helie-Lucas (founder of *Women Living under Muslim Laws*, WLURL) have chosen to have their base in France or other European

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Lokmane, Samia "Que reste-t-il du combat des femmes algériennes", published at Algeria Watch, article available at: http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/femmes/combat_femmes.htm, (accessed May 2009).

countries. Yet, a considerable number of prominent feminists continue their activism from Algeria. Among the most famous are Louisa Hanoun (President of the Worker's party, the only political party in the Arab world to have a female candidate for the presidential elections, twice), Khalida Messaoudi (feminist, previous minister and politician in the RND), and Dalia Taleb of the Socialist Forces Front. Additionally, there exist a large number of women's associations with vigorous female leaders.

While these women and their movements are widely recognized and possess a considerable symbolic capital, I contend that their actual impact on Algerian politics has remained minimal. Their lack of influence is most visible in their failure - despite decades of intensive work - to achieve their main goal, namely the abolition or substantial reform of the Family Code. After the 2005 revisions, unanimously denounced by the secular feminist movements as a mere cosmetic adjustment that were far from satisfactory, the government has now declared that the debate is closed. A second indicator of their political irrelevance is the near absence of women in the state's central decision making organs and political life in general.

As a result, I do not see that the secular feminist movement has been able to exercise any considerable pressure on the gender politics of the MSP. Moreover, as secular feminist are so far removed from the MSP otherwise very broad electoral target, it seems that the party is minimally concerned with proposing to the feminists. Although, in line with their cooperative and including approach, and as they are aware that secular feminist movement in general receives considerable support from the international community, the MSP has a quite "soft" discourse on the feminist movement compared to those of many other Islamist parties. Interestingly, the MSP gives the impression of being far friendlier with the secular feminist movement than vice versa. When I talked with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene about the supposed tensions between the Islamists and the secular feminist movements, he said:

Many organizations work within a secular framework, with which we cannot really agree. This does not mean that the relations are tense. Rather on the contrary, we arrange political activities with everyone, including secular feminist movements. If the situation demands that we cooperate with someone with completely different opinions, we are capable of doing it. We have actually done it several times.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene (Algiers, January 2009).

The secular feminist movements, judged from the representatives interviewed for this research and from their contributions on websites such as Algeria Watch and WLUML,¹⁵¹ largely assume a far more irreconcilable approach. Indeed, most of them find that Islamism is incompatible with gender equality and seem to agree with Bekkouche Soad's (WLUM associate) statement on the MSP and the term moderate Islamism:

They call themselves 'moderate' Islamists? That is the same as stating that you are not a racist and then create a Nazi movement.¹⁵²

6.2.2 The FLN

Despite a certain opening up of the political field taking place recently, the FLN has been, and seemingly continues to be, the absolutely major political actor in Algerian politics. What type of gender politics does the FLN represent and how is it likely to impact that of the MSP?

A complicating factor to the analysis of the impact of the FLN on this issue is the difficulties connected with getting a clear impression of the internal structures and power relations between the different currents within the party. The FLN started out as an umbrella organization, incorporating a wide range of different currents, and in many ways it seems that the party has remained just that. FLN politics has and continues to be temporarily dominated by different and competing, more or less conservative, political and military clans.¹⁵³ An added complication is the role of the army, whose relations to both the FLN and the current regime remains quite obscure. Also the actual level of influence of President Bouteflika remains a much debated issue. Yet, it should be possible to provide an answer by looking at the historical evolution of the FLN's official gender discourse as well as at the current political framework in place.

Generally, the FLN's gender politics has received poor scrutiny from human rights networks such as Algeria Watch, International Crises Group, Amnesty International, and the United Nations Development Program. These network report of widespread problems in terms of violence against women, sexual harassment, and economic and legal discrimination. In sum, they testify that women's basic human rights are not protected in Algeria. The general conclusion is that the FLN's gender politics is marked by ambiguities and inconsistencies and

¹⁵¹ <http://www.algeria-watch.org/francais.htm>; <http://www.wluml.org/>

¹⁵² Interview with Bekkouche Soad in Paris, November 2008.

¹⁵³ Werenfels, Isabelle, *Managing Instability in Algeria. Elites and political change since 1995*, 37.

that there is a lack of political will to make substantial reforms and addressing these urgent issues.

As described in the background chapter, the FLN's historical discourse on women's position was highly patriarchal and conservative. Immediately after independence it became clear that the FLN expected women, who had played a significant part in the War of Independence, to return to the home and their traditional roles. Boumedienne expressed the mainstream FLN opinion on this issue in plain words in 1969: "*The girl's role is as mothers and upholders of Islamic Arab morality; the boy's to assume responsibility for the state.*"¹⁵⁴ As for most other Algerian nationalists, women's liberation was for the FLN negatively associated with Westernization, and considered to be a device to colonial rule to divide and conquer and to deprive Algerians of their authentic Arab-Islamic culture.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the FLN's early gender discourse made it very clear that the emancipation of the Algerian woman under no circumstances could be similar to that of the European woman:

When we mention the rights of women and the role she is to play in the political, economic and social fields, we should not forget the emancipation of the Algerian woman. This emancipation cannot in any case lead to the imitation of the Western woman. We say NO to such evolution as our society is Islamic and socialist. Accordingly, a problem arises; it is that of the aspect of morality. We are all for emancipation and progress so that women plays a role in all realms. But this emancipation should not be the cause of the decay of our society.¹⁵⁶

Consequently, shortly after the Revolution, women were systematically and effectively excluded from the political sphere. As part of its program to mobilize various sectors of society in support of its socialism, the government created the UNFA in 1962, but as we have seen, UNFA never captured the interest of feminists as it was evidently strongly manipulated by the state.

The FLN's gender discourse has, naturally, substantially developed since the 1960s and 1970s, and their current gender discourse is much more modern and "politically correct". Algeria, under the FLN, has for instance ratified all international conventions related to the

¹⁵⁴ Boumedienne in 1996, quoted in Boutheina Cheriet's "Gender as a Catalyst of Social and Political Representations in Algeria", in *Islam, Democracy and the State in Algeria, Lessons for the Western Mediterranean and Beyond*, Routledge 2005, 69.

¹⁵⁵ Knauss, Peter R., "Algerian Women Since Independence", 152.

¹⁵⁶ Boumedienne in a 1974 speech, quoted in Boutheina Cheriet's "Islamism and Feminism: Algeria's 'Rites of Passage' to Democracy", in *State and Society in Algeria*, Edited by John P. Entelis and Phillip C. Naylor (Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 191.

protection of human rights and women's rights (although Amnesty International is "worried" about their application)¹⁵⁷. The party has also taken the initiative to establish a series of gender programs and institutional mechanisms to protect women's interests.¹⁵⁸ The FLN 1962 Constitution guarantees women equal rights and prohibits all discrimination on the basis of gender, and through their focus on free education for both genders, the FLN has laid the foundation for a development in which women, since the last couple of decades, are rapidly emerging as a major economic and political force.

However, there are clear ambiguities to find in the FLN's gender politics. In fact, many women claim that having to choose between the FLN's and the Islamists' gender politics is comparable to choosing between "plague and cholera." The main arguments to support this view are women's legal status and level of political representation.

As mentioned, Algerian women are subdued to a double set of legal frameworks. Article 29 of the Algerian constitution reads: "All citizens are equal before the law. No discrimination shall prevail because of birth, race, sex, opinion or any other personal or social condition or circumstance."¹⁵⁹ However, article two of the Algerian constitution states that Islam is the religion of the state, therefore allowing for a set of religiously based laws. Consequently, the Algerian Family Code - adopted in 1984 and modestly amended in 2005 - effectively overrules the Constitution by rendering women as legal minors. The Family Code is most often explained as a concession from the FLN to the rising Islamist forces. Yet, critics argue that the existing Family Code is the best example of the FLN's lack of political will to substantially reform women's position in Algeria.

Secondly, despite of the breakthrough of women in professions requiring high qualifications, women are near to absent in political decision making or in senior governmental positions. The FLN has repeatedly voted against the use of quotas to enhance female leadership and has traditionally invested little in female candidatures.¹⁶⁰

Finally, a last indicator of the FLN's ambiguous gender politics is the various constitutional amendments they have voted through during the last decades. Given that the constitutional text is not supposed to announce more than the big principles, the different

¹⁵⁷ Amnesty International Report "Briefing au Comité sur l'élimination de toutes les formes de discrimination à l'égard des femmes", (2004), 1.

¹⁵⁸ Such as the Ministry of Family and Women Conditions (2002) and the National Council for Women and the Family (2006) (Source: UN-INSTRAW report, 2009, 14).

¹⁵⁹ Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Algeria, Algeria Ministry of Justice, Article 29 as cited in Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa", Freedom House. Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

¹⁶⁰ UN-INSTRAW report "Strengthening women's leadership and participation in politics and decision-making process in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Mapping of the situation."

articles need to be specified in an organic law in order to be implemented. During the last decade, the FLN has voted through a series of constitutional amendments declaring that the Algerian state will actively work to promote women's increased political participation. For instance, recent amendments consist of the adding of article 31, which stipulates that "The Algerian state aims at promoting the political rights of women by increasing her chances of access to representation in the elected assemblies".¹⁶¹ Yet, as these constitutional amendments are seldom followed up by organic laws, they remain politically irrelevant. As such, the FLN's constitutional amendments can arguably be seen as analogue to their double set of legal regulations of women's citizenship - that their main purpose is to "mask" or legitimize the existing practices.

How then, is it reasonable to assume that the FLN influences the gender politics of the MSP? Interestingly, the immediate impression is that there are more resemblances than differences between the two party's respective gender ideologies and practices. Effectively, it does not seem that the MSP represent a gender ideology or policy propositions that are wildly more conservative or strict than that of the ruling elites within the FLN. There are differences, certainly when compared with the more liberal elements within the FLN but not when compared with those who, at the end of the day, seem to lay the premises for the political direction to be pursued. In fact, there is a striking resemblance between the early official gender discourse of the Algerian state and that of present day MSP. Both pay considerable rhetorical attention to the Algerian woman and focus on her double role. One the one hand, it is emphasized that Algerian women, much due to their participation in the Revolution, have earned their rights and freedom. On the other hand, it is crystal clear that this emancipation must be essentially different from that of Western women and that Algerian women's main responsibility is her family.

To conclude, it does not seem that neither the gender ideologies nor the practices of the FLN and the MSP are marked by insurmountable disagreements. Both are positive towards women's education and professionalism; and hesitant towards equal citizenship and increased political influence. Despite the FLN's adaption of a substantially more liberal gender discourse, the party has not been willing to break with patriarchal and conservative traditions in terms of the legal framework, political representation and discriminatory practices. As a result, the most explicit difference between the two is that the MSP

¹⁶¹ My translation. Source: Algeria Watch, http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/femmes/vote_amendement.htm, (Accessed November 2009).

communicates a more articulated wish that women be women and men be men, which, at the end of the day, does not seem to be too far off from the FLN's position.

On the basis of these observations, it is here argued that the FLN has exercised a minimal influence on the MSP in terms of pushing them in a more liberal direction or forcing them to moderate their gender politics. Rather, interestingly, it seems that the FLN and the MSP are mutually profiting from each other. Through its participation in the official politics of the state, the MSP is able to exercise a certain level of political influence, and, maybe more importantly, it can learn the art of political craftsmanship and gain valuable experience in the day to day running of a country.¹⁶² The FLN, on their side, can increase a much needed political legitimacy by including a political actor representing a large, but politically marginalized, segment of the population. As such the inclusion of the MSP in the government is simultaneously an attempt to legitimize its rule and reintegrate the FIS electorate in the official politics of the country.

6.2.3 The conservative Islamist electorate

A last important pressure group with regards to the MSP's movement viability, maybe especially with regards to gender politics, is Algeria's large conservative Islamist electorate. This is of course a different type of political actor, as the large majority of them does no longer bother to vote. Yet they pose a substantial threat to the political establishment both in terms of their size and in their rejection of the legitimacy of the sitting regime. As such, the Algerian regime, including the MSP, regards their at least partial reintegration in the official politics of the country as crucial to legitimize their rule.

The conservative Islamist (would be) electorate is of course a very heterogeneous and divided group. It is impossible to estimate the exact size of these groups. The best indicator of their size (aside from the 1991 elections where FIS won over 55 percent of the votes) is perhaps the massive abstention rates in Algerian elections (though the conservative Islamist electorate is far from the only group in Algeria that boycotts the elections).

As described in the background chapter, one of the results of the civil crises of the 1990s was the internal division and destruction of the various Islamist camps in Algeria. According to Boubekeur, the failure of the FIS's political strategy left the pro-Islamist layers

¹⁶² Boubekeur, Amel, "Les partis Islamistes algériens et la démocratie: vers une professionnalisation politique?", 229.

of the population with two options: to become anti-political (by joining one of the various *jihadi* movements) or to become apolitical (by joining one of the *da'wa Salafiyya* currents, to give up on politics and rather focus on individually leading an Islamic way of life). Naturally, a large part is to be found between the two, as is the MSP. The problem for the MSP, however, is that as few Islamists (and Algerians in general) have any faith in the country's political establishment,¹⁶³ the MSP's political affiliation has done damage to much of their influence and contact with the grassroots Islamic organizations. Indeed, many regard the legal Islamist parties, such as the MSP and the MNR, as *khobzistes* (from the Arab word *khobz*, bread, meaning those who only want to earn their bread) that are only interested in power.¹⁶⁴

The dilemma for the MSP in front of the conservative Islamist electorate is of course that they have to defend their Islamist credentials while simultaneously staying in with the regime. This is not an easy task, given that so many of them, regards the MSP as a completely co-opted power-orientated party. Yet, many again chose to vote for them as they represent the "least bad option". As such, the conservative Islamist electorate represents a much needed electoral source for the MSP. This again, as argued here, is likely to push the party in a more conservative direction, at least in terms of rhetoric.

The question of women's role has traditionally functioned as a symbolic dividing line between pro-Western elites and the Islamist. As such, I think it is reasonable to assume that this is a domain where it is particularly important for the MSP to symbolically communicate their Islamist credentials. This comes to expression in the MSP leading a discourse on women's issues that is much more religious and moralizing than their discourse on issues such as for instance political pluralism, Islamic finance, or human rights, which tend to be of a far more rational and pragmatic character.

Women's position, in the MSP's discourse, seems to be closely linked to the overall moral of the society and the MPS attempts to present themselves as the guardians of this Islamic moral within the Algerian state. Also the MSP's hesitance towards amending the Family Code, that constitutes a major symbolic, untouchable issue to many pro-Islamist layers of the population, should probably be seen in connection with the influence of the conservative Islamist segments.

¹⁶³ As referred to at page 26, only 35 percent officially bothered to vote in the May 2007 legislative elections.

¹⁶⁴ Boubekour, Amel, "Salafism and Radical Politics in Postconflict Algeria", 15.

Summing up

In this chapter I have tried to analyze the impact of relevant structural factors on the MSP's gender politics. The international community appears to play an important role as the MSP's emphasis on presenting itself as an acceptable political partner at the international level seemingly pushes them in a more liberal direction. The influence of the secular feminist movements, on the other hand, remains minimal. The FLN, interestingly, does not seem to have any interest in pushing the MSP to moderate their gender politics; rather, the two parties mutually benefit on each other. Finally, I argue that the large conservative Islamist electorate exercises a considerable power of influence on the MSP, as the MSP depends on their votes and aims at presenting itself as the "Islamist alternative" within the official politics. As a result, this latter group pushes the MSP in a more conservative direction. In sum, we can see that the MSP has a lot of different considerations to take. This may help to explain the party's vague discourse on the topic of women's position.

7 Connecting the pieces

This final chapter is divided into three parts: a review of the methodology and material, a tentative answer to the research question, and a conclusion.

7.1 Comments on the methodology and material

A critical review of the choice of methodology and an evaluation of the material is an important part of any study. Considering the results - the importance of contextual factors, and the divergence between ideas and practices - I believe that social movement analysis has indeed functioned as a useful approach. The analytic separation between the different dimensions of social activism has facilitated a contextual, dynamic and comprehensive framework for analyzing the evolution and impact of the MSP on gender relations. The main methodological challenges arose in connection with the collection of data, more specifically during the qualitative interviews and the obtaining of official documentation and statistics. Many of the interviews were characterized by extremely evasive and inconsistent discourses, and it turned out to be very difficult to obtain any kind of official information or statistics on this topic both from the MSP and the other main political parties. This raises questions about the quality of my material and how possible weaknesses have impacted on the analysis.

A common way to evaluate a material is to discuss its reliability and validity. A material's reliability refers to the consistency of the measurement, that is, whether you would get the same answer if you were to do the study again. Validity refers to whether you capture the ideas contained in the corresponding concepts in a meaningful way.¹⁶⁵

The qualitative interviews

The goal of the qualitative interviews was to map the gender ideology of the MSP. This material, I found to be reasonably reliable. In-depth interviews with around ten central party members ought to be sufficient to give us a good impression of the movement's gender ideology. Moreover, I had the opportunity to meet and discuss the same questions with a large

¹⁶⁵ Adcock and Collier, "Measurement Validity: A shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research" in *American Political Science Review. Quarterly Journal of the American Political Science Association* 95 (3) (2001), 530.

number of MSP women during a “women meeting” in Schlef (a small university town outside Algiers), and thus to double check that the answers I got through my qualitative interviews were representative. Other indicators of the reliability of the material include that the answers I got from the different interviews were largely consistent (in some cases, almost “overly consistent” - some of the same anecdotes were even used to illustrate the same points). The answers I received to a large extent resembled what to expect according to the existing general literature on women and Islamism.

However, that I would be likely to get more or less the same answers if I were to do the study again, reveals little about the measurement validity. To what extent did the informants and I “speak the same language”, and to what extent did the interviewees’ answers eloquently communicate the movement’s gender ideology? My interviews were semi-structured and addressed a broad array of fairly open-ended questions about women’s social and political role(s) as well as the relationship between the genders. Some of them touched upon more concrete issues such as the Algerian Family Code and other specific political measures. Thus, I considered that they were able to provide me with a comprehensive overview of the MSP’s gender ideology and position towards specific questions. Although this approach was, in my opinion, intelligible, I believe there were several contextual and situational factors, as well as features of the research constellation of this project, that are likely to have affected the validity of the material and which therefore need to be discussed.

First, the topic is one of considerable controversy. The question of women’s position in Muslim societies, and especially their place in Islamist ideology, is a sensitive topic and one likely to put the Islamist interviewees in a defensive position. Adding the fact that I am a young, female, Western researcher hardly makes it easier, as I am likely to appear as an arch typical representative for the West, susceptible to hold hostile and prejudiced opinions about Islamists in general and about their views on women in particular. These factors - combined with the MSP’s ambitions to be perceived as a modern, democratic, human rights orientated political party – are likely to provide the MSP with an solid incentive to communicate that they are not misogynist, and to mark their distance from more radical Islamist movements. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that several of the MSP members are highly professional and experienced politicians, and trained in defending their views confronted with critical journalists and researchers. It seems to me that one of the main strategies of the MSP to avoid criticism or to be “categorized” is to say as little as possible. This is indeed the weakest aspect of the material from the qualitative interviews: It was at times incredibly

difficult to pin point what the interviewees “actually” said or meant, as their discourse often was evasive, inconsistent or articulated at a very general level. This reluctance to take a stand with regards to concrete issues and what can only be seen as deliberate fogging of certain issues, obviously complicates the task of evaluating and interpreting their politics, and led to considerable frustration on my part. It simply seemed impossible to get a clear answer on a series of issues.

For instance, the MSP members repeatedly declared that the solution to improve women’s position (and society in general) was to return to the *true Islamic principles*. But they would not at all specify what these “true Islamic principles” were with regard to the issue of the position of women or how these principles could be translated in concrete social and political measures, even when directly and repeatedly questioned. Nor did they want to reveal any details with regard to what their general policy recommendation of *enrichment and amendment* of the Family Code may involve.

[Me: What does it mean that you are in favor of “enrichment and amendment” of the Family Code?] We are in favor of amendments as long as these are in concordance with our moderate Islamic ideology, because true Islam is moderate. We are against propositions that are not in reference with Islam. But we are not all together against amendments of the code.¹⁶⁶

[Me: Can you give any examples of concrete amendments you would like to see?] Any possible amendment must respect our religion and *Sharia*. And really improve women’s situation.¹⁶⁷

Other topics were deliberately fogged by inconsistent discourses. The MSP’s attitudes towards the use of quotas and the relationship between the women’s section and the central party structure are lucid examples. When we talked about the MSP’s organizational structure, Nouredine Ait Messaoudene gave me two parallel, inconsistent messages:

[Me: Does the MSP have a separate women’s section?] No, that’s exactly the point. In order to activate the women, we have made the choice of not having a separate women’s section but instead letting them participate together with the men.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Fatima Saidi, Algiers, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Nouredine Ait Messaoudene, Algiers, 2009.

[Me: So there is no women's section?] There still is a women's section. We almost have a hybrid system. We try to conciliate the two.¹⁶⁹

As for the MSP's attitudes towards the use of quotas, it was equally difficult to get a straight answer. On the one hand, the party stated that it is already integrating women at a quota system of 20 percent on the candidate lists.¹⁷⁰ During the interviews, however, central party members gave the impression that this is not the case:

There is equality in the candidatures; candidacy is only based upon competence. There is no discrimination, only competence matters. There are no quotas.¹⁷¹

Finally, when I expressed my confusion and asked Abdelkrim Dahmen, First secretary of the MSP and previous PR responsible, to enlighten me on the MSP attitudes towards, and practices with regard to, the use of quotas, he said:

What I know is that the MSP does not consider quotas to be the most appropriate solution to promote female participation. However, we will not be against it if it turns out that the proposition becomes imminent.¹⁷²

This answer is a clear example of the ambiguousness or vagueness that often was present in our conversations, and that complicated any attempt to draw conclusions about the actual political, social and religious objectives of my interviewees in the MSP.

Official documentation and statistics

The other severe blow to my material was the MSP's head office's reluctance to provide me with any official information, statistics or documentation on women's level of political representation (internally) in the movement, on the MSP's official stand and/or practices with regard to quotas, and on the women's section's official integration into the central party structure.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ UN-INSTRAW report "Strengthening women's leadership and participation in politics and decision making process in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Mapping the situation." (2009), 20.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Fatima Saidi, Algiers, 2009.

¹⁷² Interview with Abdelkrim Dahman, Algiers, 2009.

Impact on the analysis and lessons learned

The weaknesses of the material discussed above, obviously somewhat complicates the analysis. Yet, the fact that the MSP present inconsistent or contradictory policies and views – which prevents proper scrutiny of their gender politics - is *in itself* a significant finding. Both evasive and inconsistent discourses and deliberate withholding of information and documentation are positive strategies to avoid scrutiny and to create uncertainty and confusion, and as such they are valuable data. How then, should we interpret the MSP's reluctance to be scrutinized on this issue?

Concerning the evasive and inconsistent discourses, numerous interpretations are possible. It may indicate that the MSP is in fact much less liberal on gender issues than they like to communicate to Western researchers. It could also be an expression of the MSP's fear of loosing conservative votes through a too liberal gender discourse. Or it may simply indicate that the MSP lacks a clear stand on this topic and that they simply wish to "keep all doors open". Their refusal to give me any documentation probably indicates that women's level of political representation is indeed very low, maybe even lower than communicated through the interviews. I believe this information exists as I was told several times that the person responsible for public relations was working on translating them to French. In light of the members' rhetorical insistence on the importance of heighten women's level of political representation and influence, it is natural to assume that they would be happy were they able to reveal significant numbers on this issue. As such, the combination of the MSP's vagueness and reluctance to express their opinion on this issue, and their refusal to provide documentation hardly strengthen the hypothesis that the MSP is a modernizing force on gender issues.

An important lesson learned is thus that the most powerful "counter action" against evasive and inconsistent discourses is to pose detailed and concrete questions. However, in order to do so, one must have established at least a minimal foundation of what one might call common trust. This is why one should ideally do *at least two* rounds of interviews. Important tasks during a first round of interviews include establishing a relationship, identifying topics of interest and getting a general overview. Then, after having analyzed the first interviews, it is easier to see where you need to go to work more specifically and thoroughly. A second round thus provides you the opportunity to elaborate your strategy and penetrate vague and evasive discourses.

Due to the practical and time limitations of this study, a return for a second round of interviews was impossible. However, as the interviews were conducted in the course of a two-week period, I did have the chance to read them through and slightly elaborate my strategy. Though far from perfect, I believe that the material I managed to collect does provide a sufficiently solid basis for first, address certain key features of the development, and second, for a thorough and nuanced discussion on what kind of impact the MSP exercises on gender relations.

7.2 Returning to the question; a tentative answer

On the basis of the existing material: to what extent can the MSP be understood as a modernizing force with regard to gender issues? This analysis has sought to operationalize the concepts of the *modern* and *modernizing* – with regard to gender issues - as “a set of ideological and practical tendencies associated with the key concepts *participation*, *individualism*, and *legal egalitarianism*.” In accordance with this logic, “regressive” is understood as the antithesis of “modernizing” and thus refers to counteracting ideas and practices.

7.2.1 A modernizing ideology?

As we have seen, the gender ideology of the MSP is somewhat hard to evaluate as it is articulated at a very general level. However, it is still possible to point to both modernizing and regressive elements in their gender discourse. I argue that the MSP’s gender ideology is modernizing in the sense that it:

- Teaches that men and women are equal in Islam and encourages women to enter the public spheres
- Projects a dynamic interpretation of Islam and intellectual development

Nahnah’s and the MSP’s emphasis on the capability and strength of Algerian women and insistence that women should be able to participate in all societal spheres, not merely the domestic one, seem to have placed the MSP among the more modernizing or at least most voluntaristic forces in the Algerian society on this issue. Moreover, their interpretation of Islam and its guidelines for social organization is relatively little dogmatic and literalist. As it

emerged through the interviews, the *Qur'an* is understood more as a source of general moral principles than as a “specific regulator” of social and political affairs. The MSP repeatedly underscored the importance of subduing these general moral principles to *ijtihad*, in order for them to be relevant to contemporary society. In principle this indicates that the MSP may also be open to substantially rethink the issue of women’s role and rights. This was also explicitly stated in the interviews. However, although positive to rethink this issue, the informants did not want to speculate in specific developments, such as whether equal rights could be part of a possible future scenario. On the other hand, the MSP’s gender ideology can be said to be “regressive” in the sense that it:

- Uses religious and biological justifications to legitimize women’s differential legal status
- Projects an exclusive and essentialist understanding of the identity of *the Algerian woman*
- Insists on placing the family as the ultimate frame of reference for women’s existence and status
- Operates with an “organic” understanding of society and politics that prevents controversial issues, such as women’s position, to become independent political topics

The MSP’s gender discourse is characterized by a continuous legitimization of women’s different legal rights in the name of traditional religious dogmas and/or simply biology. While men and women are understood to be of equal value or worth, both the *Qur'an* and women’s biological predispositions are continuously referred to as self-evident factors that explain and legitimize her differential status and rights. This seriously compromises the MSP’s seemingly liberal discourse on women’s role, which holds that she has the right to, and should, pursue social and political engagements outside the home. Within this logic, women’s differential rights are merely a logical and just consequence of her differential role, prescribed both by God and nature, and hence not perceived as discriminating or unfair.

In order to legitimize women’s differential rights, the MSP thus projects a quite rigid and deterministic understanding of *the Algerian woman* and her capabilities and wishes. I find this to be a regressive element of the MSP’s gender ideology both in terms of design and content. First, we can ask whether rigid, stereotypical identity constructions are a modernizing feature. Moreover, this construction of an “authentic female national identity” is problematic

because it is heavily politicized; it is upon this stereotype that the MSP construct and legitimize their gender policies. This obviously poses a serious problem for Algerian women who do not identify with this archetype. This is all the more problematic as Algeria is a highly multi-cultural and heterogeneous society. Given the strong identity focus in the MSP's gender discourse, it does not seem that the MSP leaves much room for these other women, at least not for now.

As we have seen, one of the basic features of *the Algerian woman* is her devotion to her family, and this brings us to the next point. It is quite remarkable how topics related to women's situation are situated within the family framework or within the Algerian nation. The underlying assumption is that what is best for the family or the nation is automatically also best for the woman. Like this, the family institution - and ideas about women's role within it - functions as the most explicit limitation of the potential evolution of her role. Although women in principle have individual rights, those of the family clearly weigh more in the cases of conflicting interests. Women do not have the right to prioritize individual ambitions at the expense of her domestic obligations, as this is regarded as egoistic and unfeminine.

It is of course important to remember that using the family institution as a powerful argument against women's advancement by no means is an exclusively "Islamist" phenomenon. On the contrary, this has been a dominant trend in nearly all societies world wide until relatively recently, and continues to mark current gender debates globally. The family has been, and remains, a crucial issue for women's advancement, and is of course the background for the feminist slogan "the private is political". In the West, however, we have seen a gradual tendency towards a general acknowledgement that certain family constellations may be gender discriminating and that they should therefore be put up for debate. Within the MSP discourse, the family, at least for now, seems to remain an untouchable topic, a sacred constellation to be regulated by (a specific interpretation of) the Holy Scriptures, not by man.

A final (potentially) regressive element in the MSP's gender discourse is their "organic" understanding of society and politics which seems to function as a justification for not taking a position on sensitive political topics. This certainly seems to be the case with gender relations. As we have seen, the MSP largely understands women's situation as symptomatic for the overall *health* of the Algerian society. Her difficult situation is explained by the general *imbalance* in Algeria, which in turn is explained as the outcome of various external and internal factors. Society is thus understood as one big *body* where the illness of

one limb affects the entire corpus. Likewise, the condition of one particular limb is assumed to automatically improve in tune with the general progress of the entire societal body. In line with this logic, women's situation is continuously treated as something that will automatically improve in tune with the general societal progress (read: Islamization of society). The main problem with this "organic" understanding of society and politics is that it functions as an obstacle for women's issues to become independent political issue. As long as women's situation is understood as symptomatic of the overall condition of society, this implicitly means that it is useless (and even potentially harmful) to intervene and try to "fix" one part separately, just as much as it is unwise to intervene in and overrule natural processes that society will figure out on its own. Once society is sufficiently Islamized these problems will no longer exist. Needless to say, this *holistic* approach to difficult issues often functions as an excuse for not doing anything at all. The result is that the MSP operates with a "double" line of argumentation: religion and utopian thinking becomes a sleeping pillow for not taking a stand on difficult issues, while rationalism and political pragmatism characterize their approach to less controversial issues.

7.2.2 Modernizing practices?

The lack of official documentation is obviously a bad sign. In terms of political representation, the MSP women are clearly underrepresented and exercise far less influence than they would like. However, also at the practical level it is possible to point to both modernizing and regressive features. *Modernizing* features with the MSP's practices and organizational strategies include:

- Encouragement and practical facilitation of women's increased social and political engagement outside the home
- Comprehensive efforts to solve structural obstacles to women's increased public participation such as security, transportation, kindergartens, etc.
- Liberal and pragmatic responses to the challenges that have arisen in connection with women's increased participation in the public spheres
- The (possible) taking of quite progressive measures in order to improve women's level of political representation such as integrating the women's section in the main corpus of the MSP and suggesting the use of quotas to promote female leaders

Through their practices, it seems that the MSP has actively contributed to changing the traditional gender role structures in Algeria. Arguably the most important consequence is that Algerian women have become increasingly economically independent. This may be an important indicator of altered power relations between the genders.

Further, the MSP's dedication to activate Algerian women have led them to take a (relatively) liberal stand - both compared with other Islamist movements and conservative non-Islamist circles - with regards to a set of challenges that have arisen in connection with women's increased participation. For instance, while gender segregation remains an important part of the program of most other Algerian Islamist movements and as many other conservative milieus regard it as inappropriate that men and women work together, the MSP has taken a clear stand and declared that gender segregation is impractical in modern societies, and that men and women can work together as long as this happens "under modest forms" (for instance by women wearing their hijab). On the other hand, there are also several regressive features of the MSP practices. These include:

- In terms of political representation, women are still grossly underrepresented
- So far, the MSP has not yet done any substantial effort to amend articles in the Family Code that are directly gender discriminating

As we have seen, the number of women in central political positions within the MSP remains astonishingly low. Additionally, the MSP - in line with their discourse on the genders' complementarity and their skepticism towards "forcing" equal rights on the Algerian population - has shown little political will to change the legal framework.

7.3 Conclusion

The general answer to the research question points in two directions. On the one hand, in terms of many practical aspects of women's lives, such as education, work, and social and political participation, it seems that the MSP has indeed functioned as a modernizing factor. The MSP has made quite comprehensive efforts to encourage and facilitate developments in these areas. In particular, the increased economic (and also to a certain extent, intellectual) independence that these developments have brought along indicate that a transformation of traditional gender relations has taken place. On the other hand, in terms of ideology,

regressive currents seem to have the upper hand. The latter trend results in a continuous resistance to “translate” women’s newly achieved independence in terms of equal rights, such as equal citizenship. This is most evident in the MSP’s discourse on the defence of the Family Code. Here, the MSP continues to insist on women’s differential role, and consequently different legal rights, on the basis of religion and biology. The coexistence of these seemingly paradoxical attitudes triggers the question of whether the MSP’s ideological stagnation should mainly be understood as the result of internal or external factors.

Patriarchalism: a surmountable obstacle or *raison d’être*?

Again, our answer depends on our conception of ideology and the phenomenon of social movements. While some understand ideology as the core element of a social movement and largely treat it as a constant, structural factor, others argue that the most characteristic feature of ideologies is precisely that they are in constant movement and evolution. Ideologies, it is argued, develop in close interaction with a social movement’s context, practices and tactics. They do have any fixed content, and should consequently primarily be interpreted on the basis of the external challenges that the movement is facing. In “The impact of the evolution of political Islam on the national cohesion in Algeria”, Amel Boubekeur concludes that:

Not to take into account the evolutionary character of Islamist movements is risking forcing them into positions that are no longer necessarily theirs. Consequently, there is no Islamist essence. Algerian Islamism is the result of a process of opening or closure of the political field [...] these parties should no longer be understood as religious parties [...] Religious convictions are prioritized after political, economic and diplomatic interests. Paradoxically, these parties that make a claim to Islamic references are secularizing agents on Algerian society and political life. Their dogmatism has been replaced by pragmatism and search for consensus.¹⁷³

While I certainly agree that this is an important insight and that an understanding of Islamist ideology as fixed is misleading, I am wondering whether the other extreme - assuming that Islamist ideology, or any other ideology for that matter, is completely flexible and may potentially contain anything – might be equally misleading, particularly when considering gender relations.

Contextual factors clearly contribute to explain the MSP’s ideological stagnation with regards to women’s position. Effectively, the MSP’s continued insistence on men’s status as

¹⁷³ Boubekeur, Amel, “L’impact de l’évolution de l’islam politique sur la cohésion nationale en Algérie”, (Fondation Friedrich Ebert, Septembre 2009), 25 - 26 (my translation).

head of the family appears as far less noticeable when seen in connection with the strong anti-Western, anti-colonialist feelings that characterize not only the Islamist movements but the entire political spectrum in Algeria and that tend to understand Western gender roles as Western cultural imperialism in disguise. However, this does not alone explain the MSP's resistance towards challenging the existing framework on this issue. As of now, the MSP's gender ideology seems to be profoundly rooted in a hegemonic patriarchal interpretation of Islam, which tends to marginalize reformist currents. Moreover, this patriarchal, family orientated discourse seems to be matter of considerable symbolic importance and hence not something that can easily be abandoned. While women's participation and activism is encouraged, it remains crystal clear that this can only take place as long as her husband approves and as long as it does not compromise her most essential role and responsibilities as mother and wife. Within this framework, women's increased participation and improvement of situation never becomes a matter of an actual *right* but more of a *favour*. The MSP does not want to formalize women's rights to participate and there is the implicit condition that non-domestic engagements must be sacrificed if they compromise the wellbeing of the family.

This thesis thus argues that the MSP's seemingly paradoxical ideas and practices on the topic of women's position should be understood as the result of both internal and external factors. It is difficult to argue that Islamism does not contain any aprioris on the issue of women's role, as the MSP's gender discourse is deeply by patriarchal ideas about the genders and the family which seem difficult to overcome. On the other hand, relatively speaking, it does not seem that the MSP represents significantly more conservative gender views than the other dominating actors in the Algerian political context. The result is that both internal and external factors make it very difficult for the MSP, all the more so as an Islamist party, to abandon their patriarchal and family orientated rhetoric.

Possibilities within the existing framework

Whether the result of external or internal factors; patriarchal ideas about the family undoubtedly continue to constitute the most powerful reference for discussing women's issues within both the MSP and also to a certain extent in Algerian society in general. But is the patriarchal logic that characterizes the MSP's gender discourse *incompatible* with equal

rights? Within the existing discursive framework, what are the prospects for battling for a more modern gender ideology?

Given the current, at least rhetorical, stronghold of the family, it is easy to understand why many women find that the most viable way to negotiate women's issues is to do so within the same family framework. And this seems to be the main strategy of the MSP women; reforming the system "from within." But to what extent is this possible and how "ambitious" are the MSP women regarding women's status?

I believe considerable reforms can be made from within with women increasingly participating in the public debate and in the definition of the key terms that are regulating their role in society. In tune with this participation it is natural to assume that they will also increase their influence in the process of defining and interpreting the content of key societal concepts, such as family and professional life. Though the "family's best" is likely to remain the rhetorical slogan, what *is* best for the family may obviously be up for discussion. In fact, women can efficiently draw upon other intellectual traditions within the MSP to negotiate a stronger status. The movement's focus on *ijtihad*, rationalism, dialogue and human rights provide an important resource. These concepts combined with women's increased political participation and not least, political training, might well form the foundation of a process of substantial change with regard to the issue of women's position.

The next question is, naturally: what *do* the MSP women want, and how "ambitious" are they on gender issues? Will legal egalitarianism eventually find its way into their demands or not? This is a difficult question to discuss, as the borderline between cultural relativities and ethnocentrism is hard to draw. Still, at the risk of being perceived as ethnocentric, I will argue that equality before the law is a cultural neutral and universally acknowledged value. This is what is argued in universal declarations and conventions such as The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination against Women, CEDAW (1979), which were framed by people from diverse cultures, religions, and nationalities precisely in order to take into account such factors as religious or cultural differences. Yet, these conventions do not make any provision whatsoever for differential interpretation based on culture and religion and clearly state that legislative measures that discriminate women are unacceptable. As such I believe that legal egalitarianism is a point of departure that is likely to accord with the ambitions and aims of MPS women in time and that there is a fair chance that the concept may eventually become an integrative part of the MSP's political program.

Moreover, it would not be the first time that equal rights have been a demand from Islamist circles: in Iran, secular and Islamic feminist movements have in fact, on several occasions, identified the demand of equality before the law as a unifying and common platform for joint action.¹⁷⁴

Finally, regardless of how the MSP women will define their role and the type of political demands they will forward, I believe that the fact that they are increasingly participating in the definition of their own role must be said to represent a modernizing feature.

The evolutionary character of the term *modernizing*

Another point that it is important to bear in mind when assessing whether the MSP is a modernizing or regressive force with regards to gender relations, is that the term itself may be inconsistent. My general conclusion holds that the MSP's gender politics is marked by both modernizing and regressive features, and that these contradictory influences are the expression of an inconsistency, or tensions, within the MSP. However, it is important to remember that the coexistence of modernizing and regressive elements on the topic of gender relations is not something exceptional for the MSP or Islamist movements; on the contrary, it is strikingly similar to developments that we have seen in the West. When we try to measure to what extent a social movement is modernizing, we have to take into account the historical context of the term itself. And modernity was by no means something that arrived fully formed or "complete" to the Western countries. It developed in the course of several centuries, sometimes with great difficulties. Even in the *postmodern* present, there are huge disagreements with regards to what modernity has actually brought, and further, what it actually *is*. Therefore, I believe that instead of speaking of whether a social movement is modernizing or not, it is more useful to speak of degrees of modernizing tendencies and to separate analytically between different dimensions. That a social movement is modernizing on some issues (such as technology, economics, or political organization) does not mean that it is modernizing on other issues.

Women's position in Western modern history is possibly the best example of this. The arrival of modernity did in no sense automatically improve women's position. What was required was a separate movement that fought for centuries to include women's issues in the

¹⁷⁴ Khosrokhavar, Farhad and Roy, Olivier, *Iran. Comment sortir d'une révolution religieuse*, Paris: Seuil, 1999.

general concept of *progress*. What we can perhaps say is that modernity (and the concept of *progress*) indirectly lay the foundation for women's advancement by bringing about a mindset, a way of thinking (a modern logic if you will) that emphasized concepts such as individual worth and rights, a common humanity, rejection of privileges and differential rights and equality of mankind. This logic subsequently made it difficult to reject women's claims when they eventually were articulated within the same discursive framework.

A reminder: even in highly modern societies such as Switzerland, women were not granted the right to vote in federal elections until 1971. Systematic and systemic discrimination of women continues to pose a major political challenge and is by no means a subject belonging to the past. My point is that not taking into account the difference between ideals and historical reality is risky when comparing sensitive issues such as gender politics across cultures. The coexistence of the MSP's modernizing practices and regressive ideology – put bluntly – should be seen in a historical, dynamic context. Far from being something unique, the MSP's inconsistency on this issue is quite typical. As of now, the issue of women's position seems, at least partially, to be exempt from the rational, modern logic and pragmatic discourse that characterize the MSP's discourse on less controversial issues such as political pluralism, economic liberalization, and human rights. Their gender discourse is marked by a rigid and deterministic understanding of women's nature and role within the family and in society which is based on religious and biological assumptions and which are thus not up for discussion. In the light of the experience of the West, I believe that it is probable that these different lines of argumentation may eventually have to measure strengths. Given the strength of the pragmatic and consensus orientated currents within the MSP it is not unlikely that external factors will have an important influence on the question of which one will prevail.

Family law – the litmus test of the modernizing force of Islamism

As I see it, the main challenge for women's advancement (including the MSP women) in Algeria is not so much the hostile attitudes towards women inherent in Islamism as that the Algerian political environment seems to be dominated by forces (arguably including the MSP) that do not see it as in their interest to provide women with equal rights, nor to augment their level of political representation or influence. It is true that as a result of general global developments which are characterized by an increased awareness towards gender issues and that have placed them on top of the international agendas, women's presence and visibility in

Algerian politics has become a symbolic issue associated with recognition and credit. However, the problem is that the political system's rewarding of visible women in politics combined with the systemic resistance to initiate any substantial change have resulted in a political system that favours the use of women as political instruments.

Within this context, the MSP's seemingly contradictory gender politics does not only appear as less inconsistent: in fact, it appears as *symptomatic* of the gender politics of the Algerian state. Women are crucial door openers for the MSP but have great difficulty in becoming anything more than political instruments. This is arguably the tendency within all the political parties. The widespread use of women as political instruments constitutes a major democratic problem in Algeria.

That being said, it still seems that the question of women's position constitutes a particular point of tensions between modernizing and regressive currents within the MSP and that the topic is likely to rise to the surface in the not too distant future. In light of the pragmatic capabilities of the MSP it is reasonable to assume that when it will emerge and which direction the MSP will take will, at least partially, depend on external developments and power relations. However, in the case that women's issues should really enter the stage as an important political issue, it is not unlikely that the "modernizing forces" that have characterized the MSP's politics on other issues will make its entrance also with regard to the question of women's position. Or, possibly, that this question will severely sharpen the conflict between liberal and conservative currents. One can easily imagine that the modernizing reforms and logic that the MSP has initiated will be difficult to reverse.

The decisive challenge in that case will be the Algerian Family Code. If the MSP is to emerge as a modernizing force also on the issue of gender relations, they have to take a thorough account with unjust practices also within the family. The Family Code is today the major obstacle to women's advancement in Algeria. As long as women have the status as second rate legal subjects within the family, it seems utopian to believe that they can be men's equals in social and political matters. Due to a set of historical and political reasons, the Algerian Family Code constitutes a particularly contentious issue in contemporary Algeria. To a large part of the population, the Algerian Family Code has become the main symbol of the "authentic", Islamic, non-Western, identity of the Algerian people. This obviously poses a dilemma for the MSP which claims to represent this identity. As such, Family Law represents the major challenge - indeed the litmus test - of the modernizing force of Islamism.

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